CEMETERY DANCE

ISSUE #51

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Los Angeles. Criminy. He's still only in Los Angeles.

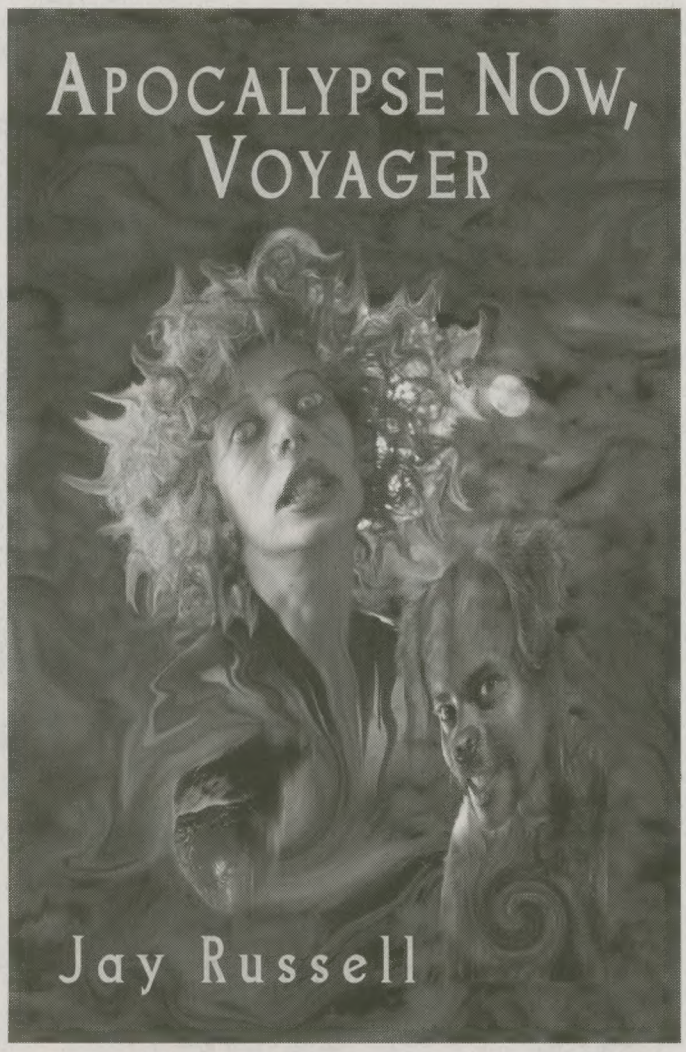
Marty Burns – once-upon-a-time child star, occasional detective, eternal wise-ass and grudging voyager into the weirdest nooks and crannies of the Great Googly-Moogly – is back on the supernatural beat. With a full moon above him and a naked lady below, accompanied by a man who thinks he is a dog and a woman of great power who is nuttier than an elephant's breath, Marty embarks on a savage journey up the Los Angeles River without a paddle. It's okay, though: the river is dry.

But, lordy mama, there's a mighty storm a'coming.

Lost Boys, hairy girls, centuries-old shamans, cigar store Indians, birthday bikers, and a baby with very big teeth are just some of the perils Marty will have to survive as he and his companions wend their way into the heart of darkness and the darkness of the heart. You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll thank all that's holy and otherwise that you don't live in L.A.

And you'll never get out of the freakin' boat.

An original novella by **JAY RUSSELL**, with an introduction by **PAUL McAULEY**, an afterword by Jay Russell, and art by **J. K. POTTER**.



"You know something is working right in the universe when Joe Santos gets a semi-regular role on The Sopranos and there's a new Jay Russell-Marty Burns out there... that it's as good as 'Apocalypse Now, Voyager' is pretty much proof that reality ought to be recommissioned for another series." -Kim Newman

"Jay Russell's new book is a fantastical quest through a mythical Los Angeles in search of redemption, resurrection, and love – the holy grails of any truly memorable epic – herewith bundled into a tight, exceptionally well-written novella. Count on Earthling to continue bringing us original, thought-provoking material." -Brian A. Hopkins

Jay Russell is horror's finest comic stylist. Funny, touching, and weird. And so is his work. Make sure you've got time to finish APOCALYPSE NOW, VOYAGER in one sitting, because you will "not" be putting it down." -Michael Marshall Smith

"A new chapter in the life of Marty Burns is always good news, and this one is a superlative addition to the canon. It may not be a novel, but it still packs in a novel's worth of invention, mystery, satire, and humor. Drawing on one of the all-time great films for his model, Russell sends our Marty on an only-in-L.A. trip upriver that leads straight into love's heart of darkness, full of great characters, countless forms of weirdness, and the most irresistible first line I've come across in maybe forever." -Brian Hodge

"Marty Burns is back in an outlandish tale of love, courage, and canine and feline strangeness. Hilarious, surprising, and ultimately uplifting." -Tim Lebbon

"Bikers, babes, and a trans-specied dog boy... Ex-Hollywood heart-throb Marty Burns goes down streets that most heroes don't even know exist and he travels with style, balls, and some very weird friends. His creator, Jay Russell, is a writer I've long admired." -Jon Courtenay Grimwood

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FICTION

OUTRAGE 15
—Stephen Laws
S& MAN 31
—JT Petty
WATERMELON 43
—Scott Nicholson
SPECIAL DELIVERY 53
—Bev Vincent
BINKY 67
—Sephera Giron
BURNING NAMES 77
—Cody Goodfellow
MR. GOODNIGHT 87
—Kealan Patrick Burke

NON-FICTION

A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN LAWS 4
—Rick Kleffel
A CONVERSATION WITH SEPHERA GIRON 62
—Nathan Tyler
SMOKE 'EM IF YOU GOT 'EM... 72
—John Skipp
A CONVERSATION WITH CHELSEA QUINN YARBRO 82
—Hank Wagner
A CONVERSATION WITH STEVE GERLACH 92
—Ron Clinton
FEATURE REVIEW: IN THE NIGHT ROOM 98
—Bev Vincent

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

WORDS FROM THE EDITORS 3
—Robert Morrish & Richard Chizmar
STEPHEN KING NEWS: FROM THE DEAD ZONE 24
—Bev Vincent
THE MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION 38
—Thomas F. Monteleone
WAVES OF FEAR 48
—Paula Guran
MEDIADROME 56
—Michael Marano
COLLECTING MODERN HORROR 70
—John Pelan
CD REVIEWS 100
—Various

GREETINGS and welcome to issue #51 of *Cemetery Dance*, which comes waltzing your way with 112 pages of star-studded content, including seven stories (we managed to cram in one more than our typical total of six), four interviews, our usual array of columns, and the return of our Feature Review, focusing this time on Peter Straub's *In the Night Room*.

Among this issue's many highlights are a couple of pieces that I particularly enjoyed, and I hope you'll feel the same. The first is John Skipp's heartfelt appreciation of the so-far relatively unknown Cody Goodfellow. An original Goodfellow story accompanies Skipp's appreciation, and I think you'll find the combo highly engaging.

My second personal highlight in this issue involves another relatively unknown contributor (at least in the world of fiction), JT Petty. Many months ago, I read a favorable review of the film SOFT FOR DIGGING, which was directed by Petty. In the course of requesting a review copy of the film (which Michael Marano later covered in his Mediadrome column), I corresponded a bit with Petty and he allowed that he had also experimented a bit with fiction. It took a bit of arm-twisting to get him to submit a story, but once he did, I knew within the first couple pages that I had my hands on something special…as you can see for yourself on page 31.

Future issues will feature both usual and unusual suspects, including: additional installments of Glenn Chadbourne's graphic werewolf serial that debuted in issue #50; a new "What Ever Happened To…?" column, which I described in a previous editorial, and passel of great fiction. We've acquired the rights to a number of great stories over the past few months, and you'll be seeing the evidence of that soon.

As always, we'd love to hear your thoughts on the magazine—what you liked, what you didn't, what you'd like to see more of. Please feel free to email *your* comments to info@cemeterydance.com, or mail to P.O. Box 623, Forest Hill, MD 21050.

Enough said. I hope you enjoy the latest *Dance*.
Until next time…

–Robert Morrish

Hello again and welcome back to another issue of *Cemetery Dance* magazine. I hope you find something you like and come back for more next issue.

A quick production update: we usually announce a full slate of new book titles in January/February, but we won't be doing that this year—not until we are a little more caught up. Even with a full staff, we fell behind with our book schedule in 2004…and the fault lies entirely with me.

In 2003, I became a full partner in a brand new production company, Chesapeake Films, and the resulting time spent to establish the company (not to mention the travel) was very tough on my normal work and family life. No complaints, it was a necessary evil and continues to be. But I know our book schedule suffered because of it, so please rest assured we're hustling like crazy to get caught up. I remember the magazine experienced the same type of growing pains when we first expanded into book publishing. There simply wasn't enough time or manpower to do everything the way we wished. But we knew it would be a temporary situation when that expansion occurred, and we slogged through the first year and got things rolling along smoothly again. I promise we'll do the same this year.

On the plus side, we've made some amazing progress in our first 18 months as Chesapeake Films. My partner, Johnathon Schaech, and I are working on several dream projects—all in the horror/suspense genre, all with writers you know and love. It's been an incredible experience and will only help Cemetery Dance Publications in the long run. Look for more information very soon in the pages of *Cemetery Dance* and also in *Cemetery Dance Weekly* (you can join our weekly newsletter by visiting www.cemeterydance.com)! And for anyone wondering if I've decided to give up on the forthcoming mass-market line…not a chance. Look for more information later in 2005.

Speaking of Cemetery Dance books…we recently released *The Machinery of Night*, Douglas Clegg's massive short story collection. *Machinery* just received a Starred Review from *Publisher's Weekly*, so copies are flying out the door—grab one while you can. By the time this issue hits stores, a number of other books will also be available, including *Midnight Mass, Hornets, Hallows Eve, Fourbodings,* and *The Illustrated Stephen King Trivia Book*.

Okay, that's all until next time. Now, turn down the lights, flip the page, take my hand, and start the dance…

–Richard Chizmar

A Conversation with

Stephen Laws

conducted by Rick Kleffel

Stephen Laws first rode in on the wave of 1980s horror. With novels like *Ghost Train* and *Spectre*, he showed a command of language, character, place and pacing that far outstripped the average foil-tinged nightmares that cluttered the shelves. His subsequent novels went on to create a body of work every bit as appealing and engaging as any of the bestselling American horror writers, but utterly unknown in this country. We can thank Dorchester Publishing, who are in the process bringing the best of Stephen Laws to American readers. I caught up with Stephen as Telos UK released his revised and complete edition of *Spectre* and Dimension Films optioned his monster-a-minute novel *Darkfall*.

CD What's your first memory of experiencing horror? Was it on TV, or film, or written fiction?

SL My first real experience of horror was as a very young child, six or seven years old—suffering very badly with asthma. I spent most of my winter months in bed, and that's why (I guess) I read so much, craved so much excitement from the page rather than the sports field. Also why I began to write. The more I look back on those days, the more I realize how my illness shaped my future years. Conquering that fear of suffocation was a big thing, and maybe my fear of the dark came from that—and perhaps reading and investigating the darkness helped me overcome that fear. My illness couldn't destroy a voracious creative appetite—if anything, the physical limitations of that illness just served to make that appetite greater.

My first taste of 'delicious' fiction-fear was the British TV series *Quatermass and The Pit* by Nigel Kneale. Most kids of my generation remember that vividly. I remember being sent to bed by my parents because I was getting too spooked. I also remember a British TV series called *Tales of Mystery*, which dramatised works by Algernon Blackwood. Their version of 'The Doll' had probably the single scariest moment of television I can recall. Back then, British TV for kids was generally pretty boring—but in later years I begged to stay up late to watch grown-up stuff like the original *Twilight Zone* and *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. *Doctor Who* was a godsend—the first television show for kids with scary stuff in it. The really *big* TV series for me, though, was the original *The Outer Limits*—with its incredibly weird mix of science fiction, monsters and Gothic atmosphere

On the literary front, I'd read—well, *devoured* actually, Bram Stoker, Edgar Allan Poe and Blackwood at a very early age. Not to mention Rider Haggard, Conan Doyle, etc. Not just horror of course. Anything that was 'out of this world,' really.

CD When did you start writing?

SL I began writing from the age of about eight. Never stopped. If I got a short story assignment for homework back then I was in seventh heaven. I used to love being given an ordinary, boring title by the teacher—then twisting the title, making it ironic—and usually turning it into a horror story. I remember working all afternoon and evening on one short story. The teacher had wanted about two or three pages. She got two full exercise books—sixty pages in all. (It was about potholers encountering a giant spider, as I recall). That same teacher kept several of my stories—returning them to me for old times sake just two or three years ago. One of them was the first story I ever typed—on my Dad's Imperial typewriter (I guess I was about ten years old then). *The Great Adventure*—an African tale in the style of Rider Haggard. I was very touched.

CD What writers did you read as a youth who inspired you to write?

SL Apart from the writers I've mentioned, the main inspiration (apart from Nigel Kneale) when I entered my teenage years was, without doubt, Richard Matheson.

I guess the novel that inspired me most profoundly was Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*. I still think it's one of the greatest horror novels ever written—compromised somewhat by the lacklustre movie version. I'd wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone who hasn't read it.

CD Did you write as a student? As a student in college, did you consider writing fiction a viable or attainable career?

SL Well, I was never a student—in the sense that I left school at 16 and got a job in an Architect's office (office boy). That was the expectation back then. I came from a very staunch working class background—in Byker, Newcastle—which was then a massive housing estate built to accommodate workers for the neighbouring engineering or shipbuilding industries on the River Tyne. The prospect of college education never came up on the radar, although I did go to night school for local government qualifications relating to my job—but I wasn't a 'student' as such. Nevertheless, in answer to your question—I never stopped writing. But again, this was a hobby and was never perceived by myself or those around me as being a viable or attainable career.

CD What was the first piece of writing you sold?

SL Well, my first actual *sale* per se was my novel *Ghost Train*. I'd written short stories gratis for local com-

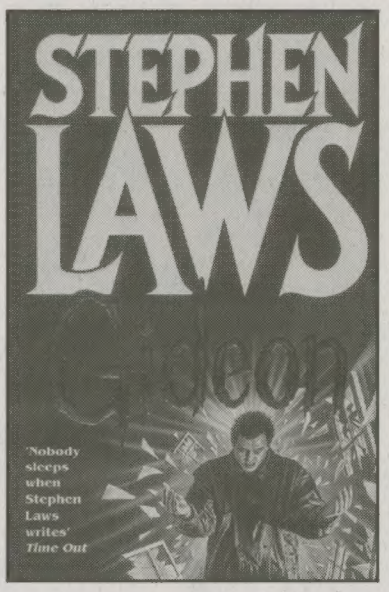
munity magazines, had won the *Sunday Sun* short story competition (first prize, an electric typewriter) and a Redifussion Award for Radio Newcastle ("Yesterday I Flew With The Birds")—but I'd never up until that time received payment for writing.

CD Tell me about your work writing in a partnership for the BBC.

SL At a time when I really started to take my writing seriously, my big inspiration was a series of plays for television being broadcast under the titles 'Armchair Theatre', 'Play for Today' and 'The Wednesday Play'. It was an astonishing, creative time on British television. For a while, more than anything, I wanted to be a screenwriter for the small screen. A friend of mine had a similar vision, and we spent a year and a half, two years jointly writing a play called 'Home on The Range'—a drama-comedy. Script Editor Peter Kosminki (now a celebrated director in his own right) took a particular interest in us and championed our cause. Alas, it came to naught after protracted discussion and rewrites. The BBC was unprepared to commit a large slab of outside broadcast finance to two unproven writers. We were devastated—and although we wrote other plays, including an unproduced stage play—it really finished our writing partnership. He pretty much gave up on writing—I decided to forge on, and write something in the genre that I love the best.

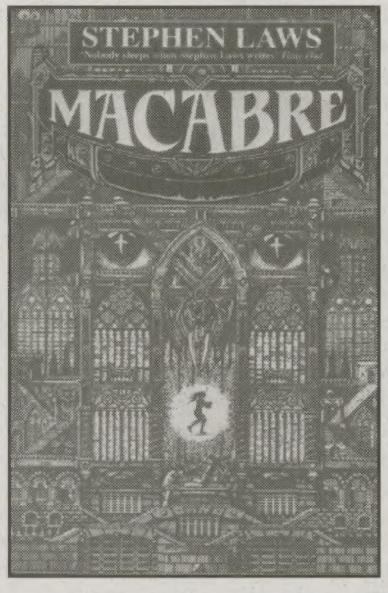
CD Writing plays and other non-genre fiction, how did you keep your interest in writing genre fiction alive?

SL Well, what you have to remember is that back then—whereas my first love, if you like, was the supernatural/horror/thriller genre, I'd pretty much sidelined that part of my writing to concentrate on 'real-life/kitchen-sink' drama—in the mistaken belief that the former didn't have a really 'adult' thematic base, whereas the latter seemed to be what real-life was all about. I guess that I was creatively intimidated back then as a young kid. I remember spending a whole afternoon scribbling a vampire story in a notebook one Sunday afternoon on a family visit to my grandparents. My uncle eventually asked to read what I'd written and—bless him—handed it back to me afterwards



with a look on his face that seemed to suggest I'd blown my nose on it before giving it to him. Reactions like that tend to bend the shape of your creative output when you're young. The big breakthrough for me was the creation of my first novel *Ghost Train*, written in a sense of creative rage following the failure of the BBC play. After all, it had been rewritten time and again to suit everyone and their Auntie at the BBC (this is absolutely no reflection on Peter Kosminki by the way—as I've said, he was our champion), and it had come to nothing.

So in that rage I decided to write something for me, with regard to no one else, in a genre that I love. Richard Matheson had been a shining light for me back then—showing that the here-



and-now, the real world, real people, real issues—could all inform a 'horror' novel. Stephen King was already taking up that mantle from Matheson—with *Carrie*, *'Salem's Lot*, etc.

CD Did writing for the radio help you as a writer?

SL Well it didn't really—only in the sense that it boosted my confidence when I heard my work read by someone else, with different cadences in their voice. I was asked to read one of my stories years ago on a Halloween special, and was pretty much traumatized by the sound of my own voice.

CD You won a contest for short fiction—first, second and third places. How did you create the stories?

SL Well, I already had a fund of short stories written—all of them with very 'light' supernatural themes. On the basis that the word count for the competition was very small, I picked the three I liked best and pared them down. A great learning exercise at the time, making every word count.

CD How did these stories lead to *Ghost Train?*

SL Winning the short story competition came at just the right time—giving me a massive shot of confidence in my work, at a time when the BBC experience wasn't working out. First prize was an electric typewriter, and that's what *Ghost Train* was written on.

CD Could you talk about the role that research played in the writing of *Ghost Train*?

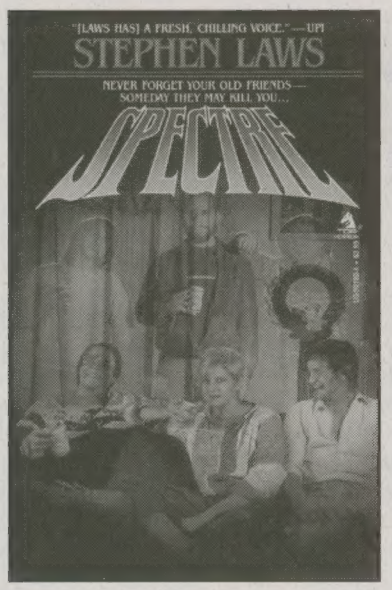
SL After I'd come up with the basic premise of the novel—that the mystical and ancient leylines criss-crossing England were a supernatural 'circuit' erected thousands of years ago by druids to summon a world-destroying demon—and that England's main railway network had intersected with that incompleted circuit, with the result that said demon was now riding the railways, possessing and killing its passengers (There, no one has to read the book now)—I began investigating each and every ancient site, actually constructing a supernatural chart, which the ex-police inspector character outlines

in the course of the book. Given that the climax of the book involves a locomotive actually mutating from a machine into a monstrous creature—I also had to know the ins and outs of how a train is constructed and how it's driven. I knew someone at the time who was a train driver on the King's Cross line, and he showed me everything I needed to know. I actually ended up behind the 'wheel' of a locomotive on that line. If only the passengers had known...

CD Talk about the problems you encountered advertising *Ghost Train* in tube stations?

SL The paperback rights were acquired by Sphere, who organized a massive publicity campaign—with posters in every single mainline railway station in England. It showed a demon riding on a locomotive, and had the tagline; "A journey into innermost terror." But on the same day that the posters went up, they were torn down when the British Rail Users Consultative Committee worried that passengers might become alarmed, confusing the poster with an actual service being offered by British Rail. It cost Sphere a small fortune.

CD Your second novel *Spectre* is certainly a novel about a particular place. England is dotted with sacred sites and places where ghastly deeds are remembered. Could you talk about the importance of place in your work, and how you use the locales you love to feed the fear in your writing?

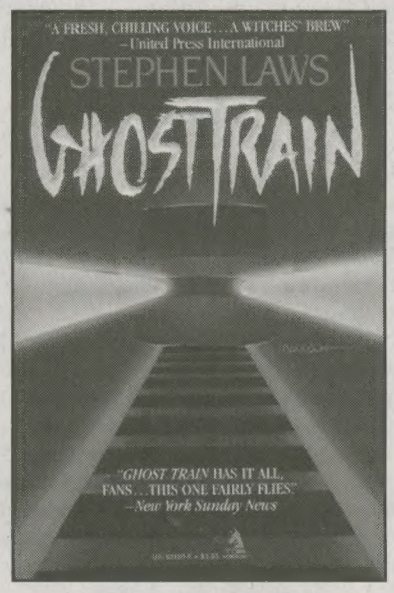


SL Well, I've used real locales often—as a means of creating a strong sense of reality, to counterpoint the essential unreality of the narrative to come. If it's a place that you know well—there can be a sense of more realistic detail and atmosphere. Although *Ghost Train* features locales that have legends and superstition attached—as does the fictional village of Shillingham (actually the village of Elsdon in real life) in *The Wyrm*—I tend to use realistic locales that *don't* have any supernatural association; again to assist in achieving that sense of 'suspension of disbelief.' I believe in getting the 'reality' right before introducing the supernatural. I've a strong bond with the North-East of England. Quite often, when my books are set here, there are recognizable landmarks. The Imperial Cinema in *Spectre*, the office block where I used to work was the setting for *Darkfall*, the Theatre Royal, Newcastle—which gets burned to the ground in *Gideon*!

CD In *The Wyrm*, you really brought out the big monsters for the first time. Talk about the influences for the monsters the characters encountered in this novel.

SL I'd decided when the time came for my third novel that I wanted to create a unique supernatural threat—something that didn't conform to traditional monster 'lore'. On the basis that every reader knows the horror clichés, I decided to create my very own, evil monster-spirit; something that had its own code of behavior and with a completely different modus operandi from anything else I'd read. At some stage in the early stages of collating notes for that new novel, I was reminded of a North of England legend about a creature called The Lambton Worm. This mythical horror laid waste to the countryside until the young heir to the Lambton estate returned from the Crusades and killed it. In some versions, the 'worm' is a serpent and in others, a huge reptile. Looking into the legend a little further, I discovered that in the North of England—indeed throughout the United Kingdom—there are dozens of such legends about man-eating monstrosities called 'worms', or more precisely in old English—'wyrms' (actually, from the German). I was also fascinated to discover that the word could mean 'dragon' or 'evil spirit,' and those legends are many and varied, with 'wyrms' of all shapes and sizes behaving in all kinds of anti-social ways. It was then that I decided I could use just the word, the fact that these legends were so prolific in English mythic history—and go on to create my very own 'monster.' Part of my research drew me back to Bram Stoker's own novel *The Lair of the White Worm*, and in the realization that he too had drawn on the same legends and created something distinctively his own from that raw material, I realized that I was on my way.

Three other key factors suddenly clicked into place. I read that in some folklore, a stake is driven through a vampire's body not to destroy the heart, but to actually *keep the thing pinned down in its grave*. Also—that in some parts of the world, suicides were buried at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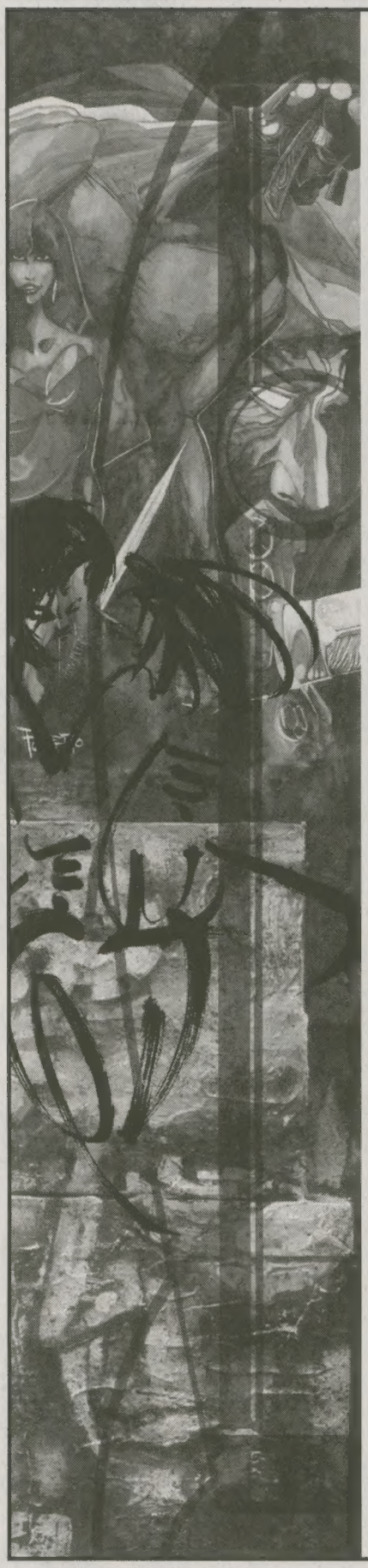

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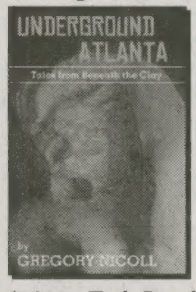

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crossroads so that if they came back as vampires, they wouldn't know which road to take and would be stuck there. Tying those things into my strong desire to also write a novel about the sealing off of a small community from the outside world, and its struggle against a monstrous threat—I suddenly remembered the old gibbet still standing in the village of Elsdon. What if that gibbet was actually performing the same function as a kind-of giant wooden stake? And what would happen if that stake was *removed*? That's when everything started to come together.

CD Your characters tend towards the 'average Joe.' Why do you want to write about normal people when everything that happens in your novel is far from normal?

SL I suppose my characters tend to be blue-collar because that's my own background. The old adage is to 'write what you know about,' and I've therefore always set my books in the real world, in the here and now; and characters with whom you can empathize. There's an important reason why I'm drawn to characters like that. If you're dealing with the supernatural, I believe it's fundamental if you're going to achieve what Algernon Blackwood called 'the suspension of disbelief,' that you introduce those elements into an ordinary, everyday setting with realistic characters living real lives. If you don't achieve the reality of your background, then no one's going to believe the supernatural elements once they're introduced. I've an abiding passion for fiction that deals with ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. A supernatural intrusion can represent that in its most extreme form—bringing the best and worst out of those characters. How they deal with the knowledge that their belief in an 'ordered' universe is completely wrong—and the resultant need to re-evaluate everything they thought about the world in order to survive, can result in a multiplicity of fascinating scenarios.

CD Your next novel *The Frighteners* spun out of a prison. Did you research the prison scene by visiting an actual prison, or was the novel the result of a visit to a prison?

SL Let's just say that I came across a guy who had done some time, and he was only too pleased to give me as much inside information (literally) about prison life as I needed. To be honest, the prison environment wasn't the actual inspiration for the novel—I guess I was exploring the Jekyll and Hyde theme, and seeing how far I could develop the premise of Good and Evil in man.

CD *The Frighteners* includes many scenes that, in prose, seemed to presage the visions now regularly realized with digital effects. What were you thinking when you wrote those scenes and how do you feel now that they've become easily and often realized in today's films?

SL Well if you're suggesting that my 'visions' were ahead of their time, I thank you. As to what I was thinking of at the time of creation, I can't recall influence—only a concentration on the effect I was after as the 'Frighteners' were conjured up to do their dirty work. The sequence where the Frightener attacks the main characters in a garage is, I think, one of the best 'action' sequences I've written. It's certainly, after all this time, the one of which I'm most proud.

CD Your prose is undeniably cinematic, and your books have the pacing of movie thrillers. Have you written original screenplays?

SL I adapted *Darkfall* as a screenplay at a time when we were trying to get it made as a British horror movie or TV mini-series, but the funding didn't materialise—despite a major cash injection from Northern Arts. As I think you know, that situation is now history—since Miramax/Dimension have optioned the movie rights and it's now being adapted by Willie Hagan. As to originals—well, I've created this supernatural TV series for Yorkshire Television. Also, an original TV screenplay entitled *Dead Man's Hand*—which is in limbo at the moment.

CD Monsters play a huge part in *Darkfall*. Do you sketch the creatures you write about to get a clear picture? Are they created methodically, or on the fly?

SL No, I don't need to sketch them. They're pretty fully formed in my head as I'm creating them. I suppose the centipede with the human head is a mutated cousin of The Zanti Misfits from *The Outer Limits*.

CD *Darkfall* also includes elements of a police procedural. Why did you choose to integrate those elements into a monster story?

SL A personal challenge, I suppose. I'd avoided police procedural aspects in earlier novels, since I didn't want a centralized police presence to slow the action down. My way of dealing with that was to wipe them all out in *The Wyrm!* But when it came to *Darkfall* I'd decided it was time to come to grips with the police procedural—and since the theme of the novel is 'mutation,' I decided to mutate the structure of the novel. It begins as a police procedural, mutates into a haunted-house mystery, then into an action thriller—then into outright horror territory.

CD How much of an influence does mystery fiction hold over your horror fiction?

SL I've always loved mystery fiction—and if you go right back to my first novel, *Ghost Train*, you'll see that at the core of the book is a nationwide mystery. Why are all these train passengers killing themselves and each other? The same with *Spectre*—a murder mystery and a horror novel. The essence of 'mystery' lies at the core of most if not all of my work—all the way to *Somewhere South Of Midnight* and *Chasm*.

CD You seem to enjoy sweeping aside the standard tropes of the horror genre. *Gideon* for example is a vampire novel in which you've ditched every aspect of the vampire that the average horror reader looks for and is familiar with. Could you talk about how—and why—you've done this in *Gideon* and other novels?

SL To keep my fiction fresh and involving. Sometimes you achieve that by taking the clichés and the tropes of the genre, and then subverting them. At other times, it's great to take a reader's expectations and turn them on their heads. That freshness can hopefully bring a new scary vitality to the horror. And I think there's a greater empathy with the characters. *They* don't know what they're faced with—and neither does the reader. *Somewhere South of Midnight* is constructed to make the

reader believe that they're heading into a science fictional/*X-Files* situation—perhaps the motorway pile-up was caused by collision with a flying saucer—but no, you get something completely different. Nothing better than being taken by surprise when you're reading fiction. I was sitting opposite a woman on the Newcastle metro last week. She was reading a Nicholas Blake paperback, and suddenly gasped in surprise. Great!

With *Gideon*, I set out to create a completely new vampire. I decided to dispense with most of the lore, taking the view that a modern-day vampire might quite enjoy the fiction created around him (since it would further serve to mask his activities). For instance, Gideon doesn't fear the cross, can walk around fine in the daytime; doesn't sleep in a coffin, doesn't fear sunlight, or garlic flowers or running water. He can't turn into a bat or a wolf. And he doesn't drink blood. How's that for a different vampire? But he's a vampire nonetheless, and I was both delighted and gratified to receive the Count Dracula Society's 'Children of the Night Award' for Best Novel. I felt at the time that the vampire genre was in danger of being played out, even though I love vampire novels and movies. ('*Salem's Lot* by Stephen King remains one of my favorite horror novels). So when it came to my next project after *Darkfall*, I knew that I wanted to write a Laws vampire novel. I wanted to take all the old trappings and do something new and vital with them. I had the greatest time with the book.

CD Your writing depends on your ability to create scenes of action as much as feelings of terror. How do you create the set-pieces that drive a novel forward, and how do you pace them within the novel?

SL Difficult one to answer without going on for pages. But in general, the action sequences in my books are not only choreographed, but occur for specific narrative reasons and in developing a tension, or advancing the plot. To take *Darkfall* as an example, just as the characters are ascending the office block while under attack from below—you'll find that the action is 'blocked out' with a series of escalating threats, plateau 'rests' with exposition, followed by further action—and with desperation and fear squeezing the action and tension as they ascend and their plight just goes from bad to worse. In other words—the action sequences are closely allied to the narrative and the character development. They're not just there for the hell of it.

CD Do you rehearse the action scenes to work out the blocking?

SL Yes, as I say—the action is very carefully choreographed.

CD Do the set pieces themselves suggest the course of the novel? Could you comment on the nexus of horror fiction and action/thriller fiction?

SL No—as I've said, the set pieces have a very specific reason for being there. The course of the novel has already been plotted, since I work from a very detailed outline. On your latter question, it seems to me that there used to be a dividing line between genres, which is much more blurred than it used to be. I became very interested in blurring that line by what I called at the time a 'cross-fertilization of genre'. I've always felt that Robert McCammon was particularly good at that.

CD *Macabre* takes cults as one of its subjects. What kind of research did you do for this novel and how long did it take you to recover?

SL I think I know what you're getting at here. On a general level, I'd come across startling information (while writing a previous novel) concerning the numbers of people who simply disappear without a trace in the UK every year—and also the increasing numbers of people living on the streets. On the basis that no one's going to miss someone who's *already* disappeared once—the theme of a cult masquerading as a volunteer organization assisting homeless street people, that is in reality sacrificing and murdering them for supernatural rewards seemed to have strong possibilities for a novel. So I undertook considerable research on 'street life.'

But I think you're asking about what happened when I undertook a 'controlled' scuba dive in one of Stockton's industrial canals? I needed to get the feeling of what it was like at the bottom of an effluent-polluted waterway (where the murdered Cult leader's still-sentient corpse has been chained and dumped), so a Marine Engineer pal organized it—and I nearly drowned when I got stuck in the mud at the bottom of the canal. A slashed hand required injections against Weill's disease (something nasty you can catch from rat piss). Never again.

CD Do you write short stories while you're writing novels?

SL Only very occasionally. And usually only on request. The longer work takes up so much of my time. That's why, in twenty years of professional publication, there's only been one collection of my short stories. (*The Midnight Man*)

CD How do you know whether or not an idea will become a short story or a novel?

SL Usually when the ideas first form, while they're tickling around in my subconscious—and then when I start getting them down onto paper. I love to free-associate with an idea that intrigues me. Pen, paper and some time to spare. Linking up inspirations, abstracts—themes and possible developments that are going to enthuse me in the writing and creation. Pretty soon, it becomes clear instinctively that I've got something that will find its own length. For instance, I've just been playing around with something that seemed to suggest development as a novel—but as I went through the process I've described above, it soon became clear that this was going to find itself as either a short story or a novella. The former, I suspect. You can actually squeeze a good idea for far more than it's worth.

CD Your novels have a cinematic feel to them. This influence comes to the front-line in *Daemonic*—a Roger Corman tribute. What specific films influenced you as a young writer, and how did you work those influences into this novel?

SL I'd very deliberately included elements from movies that had influenced me as a kid in my second novel, *Spectre*. The main action takes place in what was a real-life location—an old cinema called 'The Imperial,' which I haunted as a kid. In the novel, I transformed it into a nightclub for my

fictional characters—and paid tribute to a few movie-themes that had scared and inspired me back then. A murderous ventriloquist's dummy—as a nod of the head to a 1964 movie called DEVIL DOLL. During a television screening of Hammer's THE GORGON, something emerges from the screen to kill one of the characters.

This became more than a nod of the head for *Daemonic*, where I wanted to use *all* of the movie inspirations to create a whole horror tapestry—with made-up movies of my own. As such, you'll find all kinds of references in the novel to Corman (who said some very nice things about it when I met him), Hammer, AIP, Italian giallo—the list goes on and on. The murderous force which hunts down the characters in Draegerman's Rock (the home of fictional movie maker Jack Draegerman)—and which is known as 'The Berserker'—is inspired by the invisible force that bulges the bedroom door in one of the greatest ever scary movies: THE HAUNTING (the original, from 1963). I decided to bring it out from behind the door. The actress Ingrid Pitt is in there. (I created the *Swamp Water Woman* for her). Even the color scheme of The Rock's corridors is a sly reference to Mario Bava's lighting schemes—strange blues, reds and yellows that seem to have no originating source. There is just so much stuff in there—some of it very in-your-face, other material very subtle.

CD There's a strong element of comedy in your Corman tribute novel *Daemonic*. How do you tread the line between terror and humor? How do you keep the tension in a humorous scene?

SL Well, a lot of the Corman monsters look pretty camp now. I mean, take a long hard look at the GIANT LEECHES or the CRAB MONSTERS. Scary when I was a kid—and as much as I still love them dearly—they're not so scary now. I mean, we've all seen the zippers in some of those monster suits, haven't we? So, I wanted to recreate that kind of camp monster—bring my characters into contact with them—but try to make them *scary* again. For instance, there's a creature in the novel called 'The Speed Demon.' This is something that Jack Draegerman created for a movie in the early sixties. It's a guy in a rubber suit, and it's *fast*—and it injects drugs into you via its fingernails. Speed Demon, geddit? Ahem. When it attacks one of the characters, he doesn't know whether to laugh or take it seriously—because, he can actually *see* a zipper in the thing's side. What he doesn't appreciate is that this really is a demon, which has chosen to manifest itself as Draegerman's camp monster. When it injects and then savages him—suddenly it's not so funny anymore. That's one example of the very black humor that surfaces in the novel from time to time.

CD As a horror writer in the blossoming 1980s, you were part of a real genre literature movement. How did the atmosphere of a popular movement affect your writing as an individual?

SL The really great work being done inspired me to create something in my own style. I met and became very friendly with some marvelous writers. There was then, I believe, a feeling that the genre was wide open—and since horror was selling very well, the publisher support at that time was very confidence-inspiring.

CD You were enormously successful and well received in the UK, but never made much headway in the US. Why do you think there was such a difference?

SL *Ghost Train* and *Spectre* were published in the States by Tor. But they declined to take up my third—*The Wyrm*. It was considered, as I was advised at the time, 'too English.' I still don't understand that. It's rather like saying that Stephen King is 'too American.' This English tag seemed to stick. However, the later American sales of *Darkfall* and *The Wyrm*, after publication by Dorchester, seem to suggest that the Englishness isn't an issue. They've been so successful that Dorchester will be publishing *Gideon* next year. (Under the title *Fear Me*).

CD As a UK writer, you experienced the publishers' turn against horror? How did it affect you as a writer on a personal level?

SL I pretty much gave up for a while. The crash in the horror market, and the subsequent dumping of many genre writers did nothing to inspire confidence. I also faced a family crisis at the time, which sidelined my writing considerably.

CD *Somewhere South Of Midnight* reads a little more like a science fiction novel than your other books. Could you talk about the science fiction horror tradition, from Nigel Kneale to John W. Campbell and beyond?

SL My own interest in science fiction horror comes from that tradition which is essentially grounded in reality. I'm not really into space opera at all. I've already referred to Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass*—which is the essence of what I'm talking about. *Midnight* is very much in the 'reality' mold of Kneale and—of course—Richard Matheson.

John W. Campbell's *The Thing* was a great inspiration. The story and the movie. As a kid, I shamelessly stole the Arctic station setting for a story of my own—and included a scene where the scientists hear a noise, venture out into the blizzard and see a strange hump of snow that wasn't there before. They clear away snow to reveal—a suburban car's windshield. There's a car there—as if it's dropped out of the sky. I'm sure that's where *Darkfall's* falling car scene comes from originally.

CD *Chasm* takes the horror novel in a familiar direction, that of the disaster novel. The descriptions of destruction in the novel are impressive. What kind of research did you do to help you bring those scenes to life?

SL A local shopping centre was being demolished, so I got in touch with the contractor—asking specific questions on demolition technique, the stress factors of buildings etc. It's a long story, but I ended up being part of the company's PR campaign—and got a huge amount of information for *Chasm*.

CD In *Chasm* you use some unusual methods for telling the story; journals and first person narration as opposed to the usual rotating points of view. Why did you choose these methods of exposition?

SL Each chapter alternates between the first-person view of Jay O'Connor, and other characters' third person views throughout. That's because I wanted the reader to get different views of the same situation, through different

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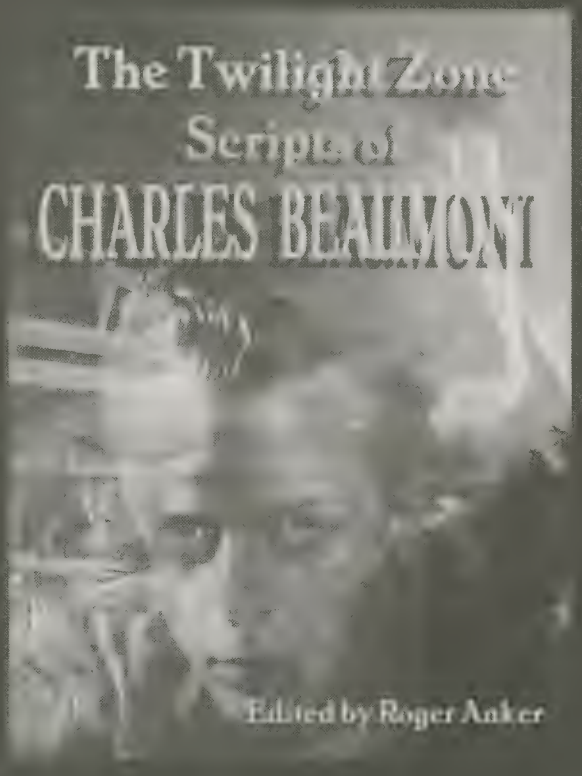

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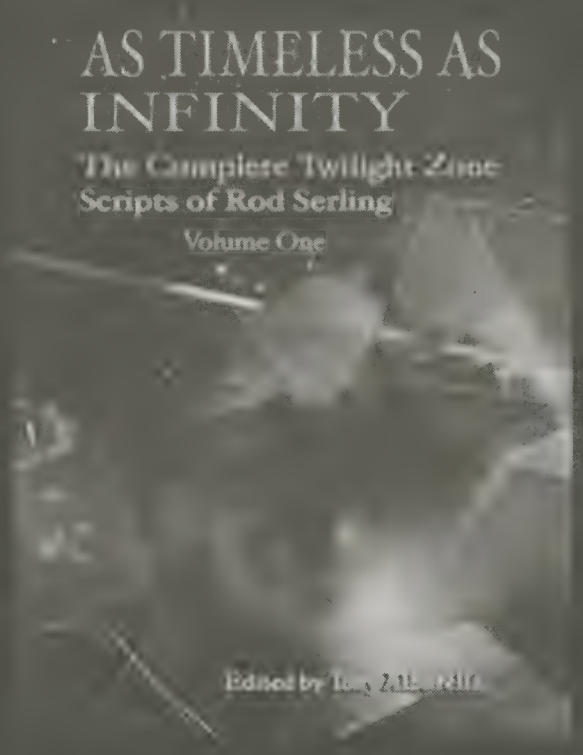

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characters' eyes—and to show that both Jay, and they, were sometimes not getting the same impression or feeling from what was happening to them—and of their views of each other. Structurally, it was a way of dealing with a complex set of character interactions in an epic framework—and hopefully a way of creating strong reader empathy with those characters and their plight. At the back of my mind was the memory that Bram Stoker had done this in *Dracula*, with the entire novel consisting of journal and diary entries of each of the characters.

CD How did they help to create an atmosphere of terror?

SL By showing each character's individual fears, and of how they were reacting individually and as a group to the terrible plight they found themselves in. I was also able to develop the supernatural intrusion on the basis of its malign influence on each individual, playing on his or her individual fears.

CD It's been six years since *Chasm* came out. What have you been doing in the interval?

SL The family crisis I referred to was having to take time out to care for my son, who was diagnosed with autism just after *Chasm* was published. I became very involved with a series of specialist teaching programs—and a radical new education system called I-Can, which was a pilot when we became involved, but which is now a mainstream service in the UK. My son and I were 'test' cases, and you can find details in the book that was subsequently published on the scheme's success: *Communication Counts: Speech and Language Difficulties in the Early Years* by Fleur Griffiths (David Fulton Publishers, London). That meant my writing was sidelined for a while. Subsequently, I taught creative writing at a series of schools in Newcastle.

But in recent times, I've returned to the fold and have been very heavily involved in the creation of a supernatural comedy-drama for Yorkshire television—the pilot for which has been written and awaits the funding greenlight. If it's successful on transmission, I've got a whole television series in the wings waiting to go.

CD Could you talk about the Telos re-issue of *Spectre*? How did it come about? What did you do to change it?

SL David Howe of Telos has always been a big fan of my work, and *Spectre* was always one of his favorites. He came to me with the suggestion of publishing a special edition, which would include new articles on the writing of the novel, foreign cover artwork, etc. But it also gave me the chance to reinstate some material that had been taken out at the editorial stage before the book first appeared—and which I've always regretted. So it wasn't a case of rewriting the book; rather a case of putting it back to the way it should have been on first publication.

CD As mentioned, Dimension Films optioned your novel *Darkfall*. Could you talk about that experience?

SL Well, it's been a marvelously positive experience so far. It's also gratifying in the sense that we spent so much time here in England trying to get it made, and we reached a dead end. I'd pretty much given up on the possibility of a movie version. Then Dorchester published the book, Willie Hagan and then Brendan Deneen (Development Director at Dimension/Miramax) bought a copy, loved it and—now it's in development as we speak. And I didn't have to knock on anyone's door!

CD Tell us more about how your short story collection *The Midnight Man* came about.

SL I'd been approached before about the possibility of a short story collection, but frankly there just wasn't enough material to warrant it. It just so happened that by the time John Pelan of Silver Salamander Press asked me, I realized that I finally had enough short stories—so was happy to agree.

CD Could you talk about your website and how you feel the web is influencing genre fiction? Do you think that website fiction is helping or hurting the quality of the fiction that's available to readers today?

SL Well if anyone out there wants to manage my website, I'm open to offers. My previous website manager has had to stand down because of work pressure, and I don't have the necessary technical skills to add material. On your latter question, I'm not an expert on website fiction—although a friend tells me that she's very impressed with the fecundity of work.

CD Has the consolidation of the publishing industry affected you?

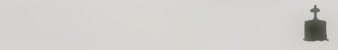
SL Well, it's certainly more difficult to become established than it used to be. Not that it was ever easy. But as recession bites, and profits in publishing become more marginalized, I think it's a fact of life that publishers are taking less risks with the unsolicited manuscripts that arrive on the slush pile in an editor's office.

CD What writers do you read now? Who do you think is making an important contribution to the fiends of fantasy, horror, science fiction and mystery?

SL I'm ashamed to say that I have a study filled with books that I've bought over the years and not read. I'm making a concerted effort to do that now. But in answer to your question, I read an enormous amount across the whole spectrum—not just fantasy, horror and science fiction. I think that's important—particularly for new writers who are just starting out. As to important contributions to the genre *now*, I think that the really important contributors are editors and publishers like Pete Crowther (a talented writer himself) and Steve Jones—who continue in difficult times to keep the horror flag flying by providing opportunities for the publication of short stories and novellas in the genre.

CD Are you working on a new novel? What can we expect to see next from you?

SL A lot hinges on the TV series situation. If the pilot gets the green light—and that's broadcast and successful—leading to a series, I anticipate that my work will be cut out for me. As to the novel situation, I've developed two or three projects—and may commit soon depending on the above.



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OUTRAGE

Stephen Laws

I'm not sure whether it was the cold that woke me, or the music.

The music was...well I didn't know what the hell it was... some of that experimental stuff, maybe. Somebody plucking on piano strings; somebody else sawing on a violin as if he or she wanted to cut the bloody thing in half. And something that sounded like cowbells jangling. On and on and on.

I was in complete darkness, and I was freezing.

Freezing, I realised, because I had been stripped naked.

When I tried to move, I knew that I'd been handcuffed to a chair; arms behind my back. I could feel the cold metal on my wrists. My feet had been tied at the ankles. There was a gag in my mouth, and now I knew when I moved my head that my neck and shoulders were more than just freezing cold. There was a deep, gnawing pain there—where the bastard had hit me with the spade.

I read something somewhere; some story where someone woke up in the pitch black and there was all this stuff about him wondering where he was, what had happened to him, and what was going to happen to him. It wasn't like that for me. I knew just who I was, what had happened, and had a pretty good idea that I wasn't going to like what happened next.

Fear made my stomach roll, then contract.

I tried to sit forward, but that only gave me a few inches. I didn't want to lose control. But that's just what happened. I began to moan, then cry, just like a kid. I thrashed and shook myself in that chair, feeling warm blood where the skin rubbed away from the cold metal of the handcuffs. I braced my feet, tried to stand and shake off the chair. It wouldn't budge, and it seemed that the only thing I was capable of moving freely was my head. Finally, the pain in my neck and shoulders made me stop shaking it. I lost control of my bladder then, and just sat there sobbing as warm piss pooled in my crotch and ran down my legs.

And that hellish, no-music just went on and on as I sobbed and fought to keep from letting that cloth gag between my teeth suffocate me.

That's when the light came on.

The pain of it stabbed in my eyes.

I looked down, unscrewed my eyes. Saw my cock and balls, shrivelled by the cold; saw the fading steam from the piss and the goosebumps on my naked legs. I wasn't sitting on a chair, at all. I was sitting astride what seemed to be a home-made wooden sawhorse with a wooden chair-rest screwed to the back. Looking quickly from side to side I could see where I'd been brought.

This was someone's basement, or workshop.

Shelves on the walls at either side. Old paint tins, glass jars full of meths with paint brushes. Cardboard boxes. A lawnmower, the box still half full of dried brown grass from last season's lawn. A stone floor. A single bulb hanging overhead.

And someone standing on the far side of the room, at the top of a flight of stone stairs.

I squinted into the light, but couldn't make out the shape.

"Cold in here, isn't it?" said a muffled voice.

The shape stepped forward so that I could get a better view.

My stomach rolled again with fear. In that moment, I knew as I looked at who or what had come into the room, that I'd throw up in terror. The vomit would have nowhere to go, wouldn't be able to get past the gag clenched in my teeth. I'd drown on it, suffocate. I struggled to keep it down, felt my heart doing things in my rib cage; as if it wanted to claw its way out of there.

A man with a pig's head had kidnapped me.

He had brained me with a spade.

And he had brought me here to kill me horribly.

That head was too big for his shoulders; big pointy ears, a huge pink snout. Slitty eyes. And he was just standing there in a black jacket and trousers, hands behind his back, casual-like; looking at me with those squinting piggy eyes, as if the light in here was too bright for him as well as me.

"Pissed yourself I see," said the pig-man.

The pig's mouth didn't move, and the voice was still muffled.

A mask.

Or maybe a real pig's head, hollowed out.

He walked to the top of the stairs as if he had all the time in the world, and switched off a tape recorder on a ramshackle wooden table. The music stopped, and he started down towards me. Each step was slow and careful. He might be insane, wearing that hideous 'mask,' but he wasn't stupid. He couldn't see out of that mask too well, wasn't going to trip and break his neck on those stone steps.

My fear turned into something else when he reached the bottom and just stood, ten feet away, looking at me. I shrieked at him, howling and screeching through the gag. Like some bloody animal that knows it's trapped, knows that its captor is just about to leap on it and tear it to pieces. So the last thing it can do is scream at it, make a big noise and hope that the beast takes fright and runs away. I didn't plan it like that. It just came out that way; pure terror, and it had turned me into that trapped and terrified animal.

"You finished?" asked the pig man, when all the air was out of my lungs and I was gasping and sobbing for breath. I tried to scream at him again, but nothing would come out. He stood there, waiting patiently.

"Please..." I tried to say through the gag, and the act of speaking made me retch.

"You know why you're here, don't you?"

I shook my head, sweat streaming down my face.

"Yes, you do. It's no use playing games with me. It's gone way past that stage now."

The pig-man sat carefully on the stairs, looking at me.

"The first thing I'm going to do," continued the pig. "Is tell you about me. Then I'll tell you about you. And then I'm going to do terrible things to you. Okay?"

This won't make sense to you, I know. But when he said that last thing, about terrible things, it's like some deep-down part of me refused to accept what I was hearing. I heard the first thing, about me; the second thing, about him—but that last thing—I didn't want to know about that. He hadn't said it. Nothing was going to happen. He was going to do some talking, and then everything would make sense—and he would realise that some terrible mistake had been made. He'd take off that head, apologise, come over and take out the gag. Then he'd untie me and we'd sort everything out. I wouldn't hold any grudges, wouldn't tell anyone what had happened. Certainly not the police. Then we'd shake hands, and he'd let me out and…

"I'm a butcher," said the pig-headed man. "You're in the basement below my shop. I'm very good at my job, very good with customers. The human touch, you know? I never short-change anyone, I'm very strict about hygiene. I sell the best cuts, give the best value. Been in the trade now for… oh, must be twenty years or more. If I have a fault, then it's what my wife used to call…now promise me you won't laugh… pig-headedness. Stubborn, I suppose. I'm down to earth… maybe less so since I got ill. But that's jumping the gun a bit, and I want to get everything in the right order so that you'll be able to understand. I had a wife, and a daughter. They're both dead. Losing my wife, Anne, was very hard on my daughter and I—but we survived. Losing my daughter Sofie—well, that was something else altogether. She was young when she died, just twenty-one. Very beautiful, like her mother.

"And she died because of a young man called Howard Feanan. He gave her a lift home from a nightclub. Except he didn't take her home. He took her to a field out in the country where he beat her, stripped her—and raped her.

"That was four years ago. He was arrested. There was a trial. He got three years, but was released in two."

That's terrible, I tried to say eagerly through the gag. *That's not justice, at all. He should have got more.*

"The week that he was released, Sofie committed suicide. Down here, in this basement."

The pig man pointed above my head.

"She hanged herself from that beam there."

The pig man was quiet for a while. I tried to show him by the look in my eyes that I really, really sympathised with him.

"She'd been depressed ever since the rape. Well, more than depressed. She became very ill. And Feanan's release from prison after serving such a short term…well, that snapped something inside her. She was on medication, had been receiving counselling. I tried to give her as much love and support as I could. None of it seemed to have any effect."

I shook and nodded my head to show him how much I sympathised.

"I made my mind up then, after the funeral. Feanan was going to die. And I was going to be the one to kill him. I was going to make him suffer first. Make him feel the terror, the way that my Sofie must have felt it. Then make him feel the same torment, the same agony…make him beg for death at the end."

I nodded vigorously. Sweat was dripping into my eyes.

"But I was denied. He left the neighbourhood before I could lay my plans. I'd soundproofed the basement. Did I tell you that earlier? No? Well you could yell and scream and shout for help down here and no one would hear. I was very meticulous. I'd cemented that sawhorse to the floor, just as you see it. Had everything ready. Then Feanan vanished. Do you think he could sense what was going to happen? Maybe that was it. Some low, primitive animal instinct. Telling him what was going to happen."

Something like a sigh came from within the pig's head.

"I spent a lot of money trying to find him. Private investigations, the lot. But he'd vanished from the face of the earth, before I could do the vanishing for him. Cost me a fortune. But the money meant nothing, of course. When I realised that he'd got away with it I had my own breakdown—was sectioned—spent some time in an institution. Went right out of my head. Spent a lot of time there and nearly lost the business. Got my brother-in-law to thank for keeping it afloat. Then the pig-headedness comes in again…

"I had to convince the doctors, you see, that I was well again. Had to prove by my behaviour, my attitude, that I was fit to be released. Had to show them that I'd got over it all, was ready to take my place in the world again. Pass tests. Wean myself from drugs. I did it all. What did you think of that music on the tape? That was me playing, you know—it helps me. A kind of therapy. Anyway—that was a year ago. And here I am. Pig-headed, stubborn. I fooled them all. You see, I'm still not well. I know that. Something's happened…"

The pig man rapped his head with the knuckles of one hand. It was a hollow *thocking* sound.

"…happened in here. I'm still the same person, but somehow not the same. There's only one way to get better. Well, two ways actually. But the first way would have been to find Feanan, and do what I'd planned to do. The fact that he got away with it that second time was the reason I got ill. We'll talk about the second thing after we've talked about you now. How has it been so far? Everything perfectly clear. You want to ask any questions?"

Muffled laughter came from the pig-head.

"Silly me. How can you do that?"

Suddenly, I wanted to piss again. The cold on my skin was a coldness deep down inside me now. Fear made me nauseous. I tried to say *Please, oh God PLEASE*…but the act made me retch and I struggled to control the bile from rising to choke me to death.

"Get comfortable now," said the pig-man at last. "And listen carefully. This next part is very important.

"Your name is Renfrew. Patrick Renfrew. And you own a garage on Ardway Street. I know quite a bit about you. Bet you were thinking that I thought you were Howard Feanan. Was that what you were thinking? Maybe you're thinking that I've been so deranged by the fact that Feanan got away from me—I've convinced myself somehow that you are him. That's what a nutcase might do, isn't it? Maybe I thought you looked like him or something—so I was transferring that vengeance to you. Well, I may be insane—no may about it, really—but I'm not stupid. No, you're not Howard Feanan. He's gone,

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and I'll never find him. But you—now you—are an interesting situation about to happen.

"How's your head? Still dazed? When we first met, I tried to be as 'careful' as I could. Didn't want to fracture your skull. Wanted you to be fully *compos mentis* when you came round again."

The first time we'd 'met,' the man with the pig's head had said only one thing…

"Hello, I wonder if you could help me with my car."

…and although his voice was muffled now, there was no doubt that this was the same man. It had been Friday morning, must surely still be Friday now, and I was working under a Vauxhall Viva on a trolley. I could see a man's legs standing by me as I slid out from under. I didn't see his face, but I did see the spade that he was holding high. I tried to avoid it, but I was trapped under the car. Then it came down—and I was awake again in a nightmare place.

"A potted history then," continued the pigheaded man. "You own a garage. You've had it five years. Most of your work is insurance repair. But you have been known to change licence plates on stolen cars. Surprised I know that? Let me surprise you further. I know all about your 'hobby.' Do you know what I'm talking about?"

Sweat ran into my eyes. I shook my head furiously, trying not to retch again. If only he would take the gag out, give me a chance to speak. Maybe I could explain what a terrible mistake he was making, show him how much I shared his outrage at what had happened to his daughter. I wouldn't press charges; would just pretend that it had never happened, so that he could go back to his search.

"You like to travel, don't you, Patrick? When you've earned enough to pay the bills and have a little left over for fun, you travel the country. You stay in small motels and boarding houses, pretending to be a travelling salesman. You drink in the local pubs of the towns you visit, go to the local nightspots."

I shook my head again, tried to speak.

"And you watch and stalk the local girls. See someone who appeals to you, follow them. You pick them up—women, girls, some of them underage. And you take them to quiet places…"

What are you talking about! I tried to shout. *I don't do any of those things. For God's sake, I'm a car mechanic. Trying to keep my head above water, trying to mind my own business…*

"And you rape them. Don't you, Patrick?"

What? I tried to yell. *WHAT?*

This time I did retch, bent double in a spasm and trying not to choke. It took me a long time to recover. The pig-headed man was silent throughout. When I slumped back, breathing heavily through the gag, he continued.

"You rape them. You've been doing it for years. The police have a special squad, devoted to tracking you down. They're no nearer to catching you now than they were when you first started. They call you the 'Careful Rapist.' That's because you always wear a condom. Don't want any DNA evidence to be found, do you? I think you believe you're blessed with special luck. Do you believe that?"

I moaned, unable to speak.

"Well your luck's run out now, Patrick. I've got you now. And it's time to pay for everything you've done. Are you a vegetarian, Patrick?"

I moaned again, tried to speak. I stared at the ceiling, as if I could somehow make the bricks burst apart and I could go catapulting up out of there as if I was in an ejector seat.

"Do you eat meat? Or are you a vegetarian, Patrick?"

How could he just walk into my garage like that, in broad daylight, and clobber me with a spade? Someone must have seen him. He must have bundled me into the boot of a car; maybe his car, maybe one of mine. How far had I been taken? I tried desperately to think of all the nearby butcher's shops on the High Street. There were two, no…three of them. How many had I been in over the years? Had I seen him, had he served me, had…?

I don't know what the bastard hit me with then, but I heard the cartilage in my nose crunch as my head was snapped to one side. Pain flared like zig-zags of white heat, and warm blood began to patter down across my chest.

"You have to answer me when I ask you a question, Patrick. That's not polite."

For a while, I couldn't focus straight; then I saw the pig-man, standing back again to get a better look at me.

How can I answer you? I tried to scream through the gag in rage and pain. *When you've got me gagged!*

"Alright, no matter. Your attitude to meat isn't the main issue. It's my attitude that counts."

Carefully, the pig man sat on the bottom step again.

The blood was still pouring out of my nose on my chest, pattering to the floor as it ran down my naked body and dripped from my thighs.

"All those years as a butcher," he continued. "All those years chopping up joints of meat. The sight and the smell of blood. How to gut, how to strip a carcass. It's a very scientific skill, you know. Takes a lot of training, a lot of practice. After a while, you get very detached about the fact that what you're handling…what you're cutting and skinning and preparing…ever came from a living, breathing animal. Now when it comes to people, I'm a very caring, giving sort of person. That was my wife and daughter's viewpoint—I'm not bragging or anything. But animals…well, animals are…products, really. Yes, I suppose you could call them that. Apart from pets, maybe. Although I've never been one for pets. Always disappointed Sofie, that. No, I'm very detached about animals, and what needs to be done to prepare them for the table.

"That's why I'm so detached about you, Patrick. You see, you're not human at all. You're an animal. You're a pig. And that's why it's going to be so easy, doing what I have to do. The courts failed Sofie, and I've no doubt that if you were caught for what you've done, you'd get away with it, too. So, I'm doing this for Sofie and for all those other girls you've brutalised. I've made my mind up. Stubborn. Pig-headed."

He cocked his 'head,' as if waiting for a response.

"Butcher? Pig-headed?" He rapped his knuckles just behind that hideous pig's ear. "Do you get it?"

I began to moan. It started, and I couldn't stop it.

"The last time was last weekend, wasn't it?"

The pig man got up again from the stairs, turned his back on me and began to forage amongst old paint tins on the floor. It would have been easier for him to take his head off, but he wasn't going to do that. His muffled breathing became heavier as he searched.

"You'd better answer me, Patrick. Or I'll get angry again."

You've got the WRONG man! I tried to yell.

"Good," said the pig man, taking my gagged croaking as an answer. "That's polite. Yes, I read about it. Only ten miles from here, wasn't it? A little close to home for you, I think. Taking a chance there. Getting cocky. That's almost a joke, isn't it? Now where…?"

I heard the clatter of a tool box being opened. The pig man began to rummage.

"Two seventeen-year-old twins. Right? Same age as Sofie when she was attacked. They were taking a short-cut through a public park, on their way home after a nightclub. Thought they'd be safe because there were two of them. Two Little Red Riding Hoods, instead of one. But they didn't know about the Big Bad Wolf that had followed them from the club. What was the attraction there, Patrick? Did you wonder if two would be better than one? So—they thought you had a gun. What was it, a replica—a toy? And you tied one to a tree, made her watch while you raped her sister. Then someone came along—someone walking their dog, wasn't it? And you had to run before you could turn your attentions to the other one. Must have been a great disappointment for you."

I shook my head from side to side, tried to stand. The handcuffs had cut into my wrists; the ropes had burned my ankles. The smell of piss and blood was hot and coppery, and I suddenly knew that I must have died and gone to Hell.

The pig man turned from the tool box.

He was holding a rusted, heavy duty hammer in one hand.

A six-inch nail in the other.

"Want to know how I know all about your activities, Patrick? I saw it all. I was there. Every time. Saw everything you did, and who you did it to. Bet you don't believe that's possible. But it is. Guess how I saw you? Can you guess? I saw you…in my dreams. Honestly. I wouldn't lie about something like that. It was all very real. I'd read a lot about your hobbies in the newspapers, of course. But in my dreams, I actually saw you. Watched you stalking. Saw your captures. Watched while you brutalised. At first, I couldn't make out your face. Then one day, in a very vivid dream, I saw your face properly for the first time. And I recognised you immediately. You worked on my wife's car once."

The pig man stepped carefully forward.

I couldn't move. All I could see was the hammer and the nail.

Please, I tried to say.

He crouched down in front of me, in front of the sawhorse. I could see his eyes now, deep in the hollowed sockets of this real pig's head. They were blue and rheumy, flat and dead. Like the eyes of a fish on a slab. I could see the obscene bristles on the snout and the ears of his 'mask,' could hear his heavy breathing deep inside there. I could smell the dead pork. But all I could feel was naked terror.

Carefully, gently, he reached forward with his thumb and forefinger—still holding that nail in the other fingers of the same hand.

I winced and shuddered when he nipped the tip of my penis, straightening it out before me on the brace of the sawhorse. I knew what he was going to do. But suddenly I

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wouldn't believe that it was happening, refused to believe what was going to happen. Suddenly, he'd throw the pig's head to the floor and jump back laughing as the door at the top of those stairs was flung wide and my boozing buddies came clattering down to set me free. They'd all be laughing at the sick joke they'd played. And I wouldn't be mad, wouldn't be resentful. I'd laugh and laugh, and enjoy the joke. Then we'd all go down to the pub and tell the regulars all about what had happened and...

And the pig man had twisted his hand around now so that he was still holding my cock on the sawhorse with the heel of his hand and he had placed the point of the nail gently on the midpoint. The cold had shrunk it, so he had to stretch and flatten the flesh on the wood.

Oh God no, oh God please, oh God no no no no no!

The pig man lifted the rusted hammer high.

No more jokes please no more jokes I just want to be out of here just let me out of here please God let me out of here!

He stood quickly again with a grunt of effort as he brought the hammer down; rising to the balls of his feet to give that blow added impetus. I heard the hammer slam down on the nail—but suddenly, I wasn't there any more.

Someone, somewhere was screaming.

I could hear that high-pitched shrieking and babbling. Whoever it was, someone was torturing him or her, and the agony had sent whoever it was insane. Sometimes the screaming would dissolve into tears and babbled sounds, as if the person was begging for mercy. But then the screaming would start again, and I wished that it would just stop. Those sounds, that agony, had nothing to do with me. I was asleep here in this safe place, and I just wanted to drift away again. If I could just drift away and the sounds stopped, then I could wake up and get on with the transmission job on the Peugeot that was brought in yesterday. I willed those sounds to stop...and sure enough, they began to quiet. Fading now...fading...fading... Time to wake up and forget the nightmares.

When I did wake up, I wished that I was dead.

I was on fire.

Someone had heaped red-hot coals between my legs and poured acid down there.

I recognised the screaming from my nightmares as I screamed again.

My throat was sore with the effort, but that was nothing to what was going on in my lap.

Breathless, agonised—I looked down.

And began to scream again.

My penis had swollen between the nail and my groin; swollen to the size of a small purple balloon. The nail had been hammered flat to the sawhorse, squashing the flesh flat there as well. I couldn't see any blood. The agony had released my bladder; the swollen balloon was filled with piss that had nowhere to go.

I was babbling now, and it was in the voice of someone I didn't know.

It was only then that I realised the pig man had gone.

I'd no idea how long I'd been down there, or how long he had left me alone.

When I saw what the pig man had lain carefully on the steps for me to see, another sound came out of me. I sounded like a seven-year-old kid now; high-pitched and keening.

There was a handsaw, a pair of pliers, a Stanley knife, the same rusted heavy-duty hammer...and more nails, all laid out in a neat row.

All those years as a butcher, the pig man had said. All those years chopping up joints of meat. The sight and the smell of blood. How to gut, how to strip a carcass.

I wept like a baby, then; completely out of control.

After a while, I tried to move. It sent fresh waves of burning agony through me. Somewhere, something crunched. Had my frenzied thrashing worked the legs of the sawhorse loose from where they'd been cemented—or was this some other part of my body cracking and tearing under the strain? Through the pain, it was impossible to tell.

There was a noise at the top of the stairs.

A key in a lock.

Dear God, he was coming back.

I had to do something—but what the hell could I do?

I let my head fall forward on my chest, tried to keep as still as I could. There was no reasoning behind my plan to play dead. It was an instinctive thing, borne out of naked terror. I hadn't any plans beyond that—didn't know what possible good it could do me or how I could turn it to my advantage. But I struggled to keep my breathing as shallow as possible, even though my heart was hammering and fear was a sick, wrenching cancer in my guts. The door opened and closed.

There was a click, and that insane music started again. Jangling and keening and screeching: the music of a madman.

I kept my head down.

Another click, and the music stopped.

I could hear his soft tread on the stone stairs as he came down.

At the bottom he paused.

"Patrick?" Again, the muffled voice. He was wearing that hideous pig's head again.

The sound of his footfalls changed as he reached the stone floor, and then paused again.

"Are you awake, Patrick?"

I held my breath.

"Don't tell me. You're dead. Is that it?"

He was walking slowly around me know. I heard the clatter of metal. The toolbox, or a pail.

"Oh dear, he wants me to think he's dead. Shall I untie him, then? Shall I take the key from my pocket and unfasten the handcuffs. No use keeping him tied up there if he's dead. But what if he's not dead? Why, then he'll grab me—overpower me. Then he'll be free. Is that the plan, Patrick?"

Again, a clattering of metal.

And then the pig man threw the bucket of cold water at me.

He might just as well have used an electric cattle-prod—the shock effect was the same. I writhed and bucked, screaming through the gag as the sudden movement sent new agony flaring and raging in my groin. Water flew from my head as I furiously shook myself. When my muffled screams dissolved into sobs again, the pig man put down the bucket and moved back to the stairs.

"Welcome back to the land of the living."

I watched him carefully pick up the pliers from the stairs.

"You're going to wish that you really were dead, Patrick. You're going to wish that for a long, long time before it happens."

He started slowly towards me, and I couldn't take my eyes off the pliers.

I tried to will myself away, tried to fly away in my mind—as if I could somehow turn into a bird and escape. There was another horrified part of me that wanted to submit, just so that it could be over and done. I twisted my head wildly, and suddenly the pain in my lap was nothing compared to the utter terror that overcame me as the pig man grabbed me by the hair.

Suddenly, the gag was loose. He'd untied it.

"You've got the wrong man!" I yelled. "Please, for God's sake! Don't do this!"

"Come on now," His voice was supposed to be calm and soothing as he tried to hold my head. "You know I have to do this. You know you have to pay."

"I'll do anything! Please! I won't tell anyone! Please…"

"Shhhh. Come on, now."

"HELP ME SOMEONE! FOR GOD'S SAKE, HELP ME!"

"Soundproofed down here. Don't you remember?"

"PLEASSSSE!"

"Open wide, Patrick."

The pig man gripped my face with one hand, his thumb digging into one cheek, his fingers in the other. By making a fist, he was forcing my mouth open.

I saw the pliers in his other hand as he leaned his weight against me.

"Hope you've got all your teeth. Hope you've taken care of them, because…"

I sank my teeth into his hand.

The pig man yelled, tried to shake his hand free.

But I'd got a good hold between his thumb and forefinger. I shook my head, worried at the skin like a dog; felt my teeth tear right down through the membrane to the muscle beneath. The pig man's yell turned into a whooping scream. He slammed the pliers into my head; once, twice, three times. But I knew he'd do that, and the pain was nothing compared to the pain and terror I was already feeling. The pliers rattled to the floor. Blood flowed down the side of my face from where the pliers had torn my temple and cheek, but I just shook my head again, kept my teeth firmly clamped—felt the skin tear again as they met bone.

The pig man yanked away, trying to get free.

I heard the ripping sound again, beneath me—and this time I knew that my frenzied struggling really had torn the sawhorse free from the concrete.

I knew that I mustn't open my mouth, knew that I had to keep my teeth clamped in his hand. And I knew that if there was any chance of ever escaping from this nightmare, it had to be now—or not at all. I heaved up, bracing my tied feet on the concrete, putting all the strain into my back.

The pig man was screaming, beating at my head, yanking away.

The legs of the sawhorse cracked and broke free from the concrete.

Still handcuffed and tied, and knowing instinctively that I only had one move—I threw myself forward at the pig man. He was already straining backwards to get away from me. Suddenly, the combined weight of the freed sawhorse and my own body slammed into him—and we fell to the concrete floor.

I heard the breath *whoomp* out of him as I fell over his body.

The pig's head bounced away across the floor.

His hand wrenched free from my mouth—a wet, red mess. There was a flap of skin in my mouth and I could taste salt. Now I could see that I was lying on top of a middle-aged man with long strands of lank black hair parted over a balding pate. His eyes were popping out of his skull. I could see my own terror there. But in the next moment, he would be able to shove me aside—and start all over again.

The new agony meant nothing now. There was only utter desperation. Something happened inside me. I think that the fear and the pain turned me into something else. That, and the knowledge that I still had a chunk of this madman's flesh in my mouth—that I had torn it from him like an animal.

I think that, at that moment, I became an animal.

There was no time to think, nothing else to do.

I spat out the raw and bloodied flesh of the pig man's hand.

And sank my teeth into the side of his exposed neck.

He shrieked, just like an animal.

I yanked and shook my head, teeth clamped together, just like an animal.

And when the pig man thrust me aside, my mouth was filled with raw and bloody meat.

I watched him lurch to his feet with his eyes still popping. His mouth was opening and closing, and he was holding one hand to the open wound in his neck. Blood was spurting from between his fingers like a miniature sprinkler system; thin, dark streamers jetting out under great pressure. He was silent now, walking in circles, not looking at me anymore.

Gagging, I spat out the chunk of flesh.

The sight of it made me vomit at last.

He stumbled on the pig's head and fell to his knees.

His shirt, jacket and trousers were dark with blood.

Now, he was groping at the floor, still holding the wound in his neck—as if he was looking for a lost contact lens or something.

"Sofie." When he spoke, it sounded as if he was gargling.

Carefully, gently, he laid himself down on the concrete floor—as if getting himself comfortable for a good night's sleep. His hand fell away from his throat, and a dark pool quickly spread around his head. His legs shivered and kicked for a full five minutes.

And then the pig man was still.

I was still something other—and less—than human. When I knew that he was dead, and I was free, I began to scream and yell at the top of my voice. It was the sound of an animal, and I let all the fear and the desperation and the horror out of myself. When it ended, I wept for a long time—just like a kid.

But my torture hadn't ended yet.

Although I was free from the back-rest, I was still handcuffed, still tied—and still nailed to the sawhorse.

I don't know how long it took to shuffle and drag myself to the pig man's body, inch by agonised inch, lying on my side. It might have been hours. The pain in my groin and bladder was worse now that it had ever been. It was a slow-burning fire inside, getting worse with each passing minute. I knew that I had to get free, or something would rupture inside me.

Hands behind my back, I searched his pockets and found the keys to the handcuffs. I wept tears of frustration, getting the key into the lock. When the handcuffs finally popped open, I was covered in the pig man's blood. There were open and weeping wounds in my wrists where I had struggled and torn

the skin. I was free from the sawhorse-brace, but still fastened in that most obvious place. There was no time to untie my feet.

I searched the floor, found the pliers lying in the pig man's blood.

I couldn't get a grip on the nail. It had been hammered flat to the wood, and I knew that if I continued trying, the skin of my penis would tear at last. There was nothing else for it. I dragged myself to the toolbox, carefully hauling the sawhorse with me. When I'd found the heavy-duty hammer, I inched myself to the stairs. Lying on my side at the bottom of those stairs, I braced the sawhorse at an angle on the bottom step—so that the point of the impaling nail was sticking up in the air.

I prayed and wept at the same time.

I tried to think of another way.

But there was no other way.

Yelling at the top of my voice, I brought the hammer down on the point of the nail.

If I blacked out, it must have only been for seconds—because suddenly, blood and piss were pooling all around me. Hands shaking badly, I moved myself around to see that the nail had been pushed through by a couple of inches. That small swollen purple balloon had emptied—but when I saw what had happened to my penis I began sobbing again. This time, I could push it down from the head of the nail. My hands were still shaking so badly that I dropped the pliers three times before I could get a grip on the nail head. It came free easily.

Maybe I wasn't an animal anymore.

But holding myself between the legs as I finally untied my feet and started shakily up the stone stairs I knew that I was now also less than a man.

I paused at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall and trying to fight off dizziness. I looked down into the basement that had been my torture chamber, and at the dark shape lying on the floor next to the sawhorse. I had to get out of here; had to wash, get the blood off. Find some clothes, get medical help.

A dark wave of emotions came over me then, difficult to sort out.

Relief is too small a word for the way I felt then. Grateful, horrified, sick. All of this, and more.

But, more than anything else—perhaps regret.

Crazy, I know.

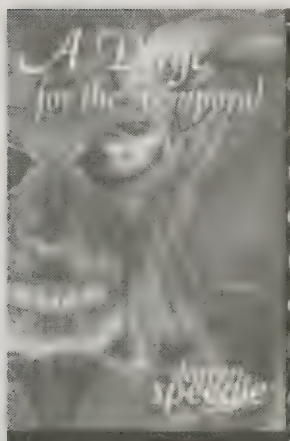
But even then, after everything that had happened to me, I could still feel it.

Regret that I might have to find another hobby—and that the bastard who'd been out walking his dog that night had prevented me from getting the other sister.

The basement door was unlocked.

I walked out of the torture chamber.

And into freedom.



This collection heralds the return of the subtly crafted horror tale. *A Dirge* lingers on the dark mystery of the supernatural, creates the giddy feeling of fear mixed with excitement, that only comes from partial revelations, things half-glimpsed and misty. Available in trade paperback, $14.95, wherever books are sold.

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"Jeffrey Thomas is a writer to watch. I just can't put down his books once I start them."

—Douglas Clegg

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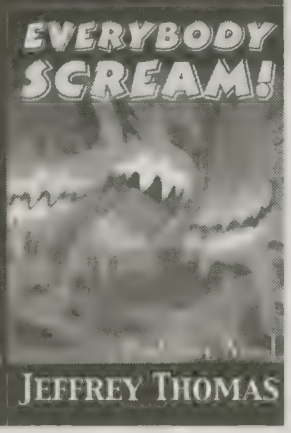

AUTHOR'S NOTE

"Outrage" is probably (and deliberately) one of the nastiest things I've ever written. And for a specific reason. There was a child abduction/rape event that hit the news a while back that so incensed me that it brought out the father/protector instinct in me so much that for a very brief, but very intense moment I exploded over a couple of beers with friends and declared that if anyone "did something to one of my kids…"

Afterwards, I was scared by the ferocity of my feelings. A strange mixture of rage, fear, justification, doubt, hate, anxiety—you name it. The story came out of that. Nasty, nasty, nasty. But—

The whole point of the "Outrage" is that last moment, when the reader discovers that the main character is not the innocent he or she is led to believe, and that this vile rapist escapes. I wanted that last moment to question the whole story, and the emotions within it. My own black 'revenge' feelings for a real-life family I don't know are questionable, but the guilt for having those feelings actually created the story. I like to think that the last moment creates a moral and emotional dilemma for the reader. Does it create a sense of outrage? Maybe at me for having written it? I hope so. And then maybe some thought about the darkness inside us all. One important horror editor was certainly offended, and turned the story down flat for an anthology years ago.

Charlee Jacob's Dread in the Beast: The Novel

DREAD IN THE BEAST used to be a novella about the goddess of waste and the king of wasters. Now it is a novel, stuffed full of the gruesome and horrible. Taken from the mythologies and histories of humankind, it follows the trail of the Mother Spririt of the worst that the world is capable of producing. From the catacombs of ancient Rome where a blasphemous sect twisted the message of the early Christians to modern America with its obsession with violence, deities and saints and the reincarnations of beasts battle over sublime and profane, where the very reasons for existence for us all may lie in the unthinkable.

Introduction by Edward Lee

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—Edward Lee (author of CITY INFERNAL, FLESH GOTHIC, INCUBI, and SUCCUBI) from his introduction

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BEV VINCENT

FROM THE DEAD ZONE

STEPHEN KING NEWS

HELLO, LOYAL READERS and newcomers to my column alike. The soundtrack for this column is *Boneyard Lullabies* by Nick Noxious and the Necrophiliacs. With memorable ditties like "The Night Evelyn Crawled from Her Grave" and "Rigor Mortis," this album is destined to be a classic. Artist Glenn Chadbourne spent the cold Maine winter working on this album with a group of friends last year and it's a corkah! The title of track two should ring a few bells with people.

After a one-day laydown of 685,000 copies, *Song of Susannah* debuted in the top position of all the major bestseller lists, temporarily displacing *The Da Vinci Code* from the spot it had held for 21 of the 24 weeks in 2004 to that point. It settled back into second place the following week and enjoyed a good run in the top ten. A second printing of 25,000 copies was ordered shortly after publication day. The book was still hovering around the number ten position after eight weeks on the list as I write this.

Song of Susannah was reviewed favorably in the major media outlets. Faren Miller in *Locus* magazine said, "This book's extraordinarily complex interplay of metaphysics and multiverses, flagrant pulp and sophisticated metafiction (both sly and devastatingly direct self-reference), could inspire dozens of Ph. D. theses...King turns a potential recipe for literary meltdown into what just might be a masterpiece."

Much ink was spilled about King's appearance in the book, with reviewers generally coming down on the favorable side. Michael Berry of the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it an "audacious gambit, one that threatens to shatter the reader's willful suspension of disbelief," but says that instead of robbing the story, King's presence gives it a boost.

Have you been to Can'-Ka No Rey, the field of roses that surrounds the Dark Tower, and the road that leads up to it? Have you stood beside those who crested the final hill and saw the top of the Tower in the distance at the end of their long road? By the time you read this, *The Dark Tower* will have been on shelves for some time, so I'm going to assume that if you're interested in the series at all, you've probably read the book or heard a lot about it. I'm not going to be too spoilerific, but if you want to avoid any discussion of Volume VII because you're waiting for the paperback releases (*Wolves of the Calla*: trade paperback in January 2005, *Song of Susannah*, September 2005, mass market paperbacks in 2006), skip down to the next little row of grave markers.

As I've mentioned, I wrote a book called *The Road to the Dark Tower* that explores the Dark Tower series. You can imagine my surprise, then, when I received my galley copy of *The Dark Tower* and discovered that King had rewritten the last volume, invalidating all my arguments.

No, not really—but I had that nightmare more than once in the weeks before Scribner issued the galley, which was accompanied by a polite letter beseeching reviewers to help preserve the book's secrets. "PLEASE respect the Dark Tower fans that have been waiting for over thirty years to read the conclusion of Roland's quest, and do not give away the contents of this book, or pass on this galley for resale, before that date."

However, even before Scribner's distribution was finished, a galley showed up on eBay. A group of fans from The Dark Tower dot net (www.thedarktower.net) ganged up on sellers and did a pretty good job of convincing them to see the error of their ways and withdraw the books from auction. Galleys of *The Road to the Dark Tower* also showed up for auction in August, with "Buy It Now" options of over $250. Geez, what a bargain.

Once galleys of *The Dark Tower* reached fans, discussion of the final books' revelations began in earnest a full two months before it was published on September 21st, which is also King's birthday. Some fans, unwilling to have the book spoiled, avoided web sites and message boards where plot elements might be revealed, while others actively went in search of spoilers to tide them over after the first part of Chapter One was posted on King's web site in late July.

Some of Michael Whelan's artwork also began to emerge around this time, specifically two kick-ass color prints—one of Randall Flagg and one of the Crimson King sitting on his throne of skulls—and one of the black and white "spot illustrations" that adorn the end of each chapter. The galleys only contain the black and white artwork, so I can't comment yet on the remaining color plates, but from what I've seen already I think the illustrations in this book are destined to become my favorites. Some people weren't taken with the cover art, quibbling over the depiction of Roland, who bears a striking resemblance to Clint Eastwood.

Hans-Ake Lilja has a wonderful interview with Whelan on his web page, wherein the artist talks in depth about the process of illustrating such a book. He rarely does more than the cover for a book and it usually takes him about a month to do a color painting, so *The Dark Tower* took him about a year.

"I threw away any established procedures when I did the work for this one. My only guide was my immediate response to a particular scene; that immediacy was my guiding principal. Some of the illustrations are in oils, some in acrylics. Some I drew out in charcoal first, some were painted directly with no preliminary work. For most of them I did a rough concept sketch in charcoal or acrylics. Some of them I did a little color sketch for, before beginning. Then it was off to the races." To read the rest of the interview, visit www.liljas-library.com/whelanint.html.

Now that the Dark Tower saga is complete, what question rises to the top of the King's FAQ? The one I hear most often is: Do you think King will retire now?

Retirement for a writer may take on a different form from what people employed in other professions might consider. A writer—especially a successful one—may find his career governed by deadlines and contracts for books not yet written. Many best-selling authors are on a one-book-a-year track that obligates them to perform on demand. King has often contracted for books as-yet unwritten. Once the titles of these books emerge, it puts an onus on the writer to complete them, even if the wind goes out of the sails.

My opinion: What retirement means for someone like King is that he will likely continue to write, but he'll probably no longer enter into contracts that require him to produce books on someone else's schedule. If a book goes tits up (hey, they said it on *Kingdom Hospital* on ABC during prime time, so I figure I can get away with it, too!) then he can slip it into the trunk and move on to something else.

In recent months, he has mentioned several times that he's working on a novel. He told *Entertainment Weekly*, "I don't know how well it's going, but the nice thing about it is, having announced my retirement, I don't feel like I'm under any pressure." In his August newsletter, Stu Tinker at Betts Bookstore said that he'd heard the book was based on something that happened to King last fall at their home in Bangor. That leads me to believe that he's writing about the perils of home improvement, something in the vein of *A Year in Provence*, where the contractors perennially profess they will be back to finish up "tomorrow." A real horror story, in other words.

So, there may be a novel in the offing, and a couple of new short stories will appear in the near future, along with "The Things They Left Behind," the novella for Ed McBain's anthology, *Transgressions*, which is due in May. The moderator of his message board (affectionately dubbed the motherator by regular visitors) indicated that talks are underway for a cable project, but nothing had been finalized in time for this column.

One reason King's promotional activity for *The Dark Tower* was relatively toned down compared to what he might have anticipated a year or two ago was the deadline for *Faithful: Two Diehard Boston Red Sox Fans Chronicle the 2004 Season*, his collaboration with Stewart O'Nan, published in December.

After getting jerked around the schedule and put on prolonged hiatus, *Kingdom Hospital* completed its beleaguered run on ABC in July. The season-long series started out with over fifteen million viewers but the initial episode received numerous negative reviews and the ratings declined rapidly as viewers either lost interest or couldn't find the program when ABC shifted it to a new day and time against *C.S.I.*, a slot described by King as "where shows go to die." Approximately one million viewers saw the finale. For cable, success is measured in the low millions, but for a network program this represents abject failure, "the equivalent of the black death," according to King.

King worked hard to keep the series from disappearing with a whimper, footing the advertising campaign when it was clear that the ratings were going south. He devoted an *Entertainment Weekly* column to his thoughts about why the program didn't work the way everyone hoped it would. In "A Kingdom That Didn't Come," he writes that the network, the executive producer, the director and King and his co-writer Rick Dooling all believed the show was going to be a roaring success and that ABC had already bought and paid for a "bible" for the second season before the series debuted.

He said that his wife, who wrote the story on which one of the later episodes was based, commented after the first episode aired that she liked it but it had "a lot of heavy lifting in it." King admits that the heavy lifting continued for the next couple of episodes as well, although it was mixed with fun. "I realize now, we were asking viewers to give us a week or two, maybe three, and that was more time than most were willing to give...inertia is a tough barrier to crash through, and *Kingdom Hospital* wasn't capable of doing it."

He also addressed the realities of commercial television. "[*Kingdom Hospital*] is like a camp story where

you get everybody in the tent and turn out the lights and you start to tell them something spooky. Except on network television, they make you turn on the lights every 10 minutes. It's very difficult to sustain the mood with a scary story when you get five commercial breaks in an hour."

I was one of the million or so who stuck through to the end, and I agree that things really picked up during the last five hours, but the series had some moments that were really difficult to get past, especially early on. When the operating team burst into song, I cringed, and if I hadn't already read past that point in the scripts I might have been tempted to flip the channel. I had no problems with the talking animals (and I think the idea to cast the animals' voices as those of their owners or alter egos, including Paul/Antubis, was clever) and some of the music for the series was brilliant, especially "Where's Your Head At?" by Basement Jaxx during Headless Frank's romp through the old Kingdom.

I also got a kick out of King's dual cameo in the finale. First, his scene as a TV lawyer from *Storm of the Century* replayed in its entirety on an intact television screen (in the miniseries, only fragments of the scene were shown on a broken TV). He was also the long-absent maintenance man, Johnny B. Goode, and had a nice scene with Dr. Stegman and a couple of reaction bits later on. He'd had a voice cameo during one of the middle episodes, playing the unseen AA sponsor of the seismologist, Richard Schwarzton, whose name means "Black Noise," his pet theory.

The special effects were stellar, with Antubis being one of TV's crowning achievements. Also notable was the work on Headless Frank. The actor's head was digitally removed in post-production and replaced with a computer-generated neck stump. The series was nominated for Emmys for outstanding main title design and outstanding special visual effects for a series.

By the time you read this, it should be available on a four-disk DVD set with commentary by King and other filmmakers. The boxed set also contains four short features: "Patients and Doctors - the cast of *Kingdom Hospital*" (14 minutes), "Inside The Walls - The making of *Kingdom Hospital*" (15 minutes), "Designing *Kingdom Hospital* - A tour" (7 minutes), and "The Magic of Antubis" (8 mins).

❡ ❡ ❡

Joel Sadilek is scheduled to direct a "dollar baby" adaptation of the short story "Lunch at the Gotham Café" for Turtle Bay Entertainment. Shooting of GOTHAM CAFÉ was slated to take place in Los Angeles in mid-September and the movie is expected to debut at film festivals in 2005. Yours truly penned the script along with Julie Sands and Peter Schink, my first foray into the heady world of adaptations. The actor who has been cast to play Guy, the mad maitre d', is Cullen Douglas, who you may have seen in some recent T-Mobile commercials, as well as the adaptation of Dave Barry's *Big Trouble*. As far as I'm concerned, there's no better person on the planet for the part—he inhabits the character in the most chilling way!

Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak is one of the film's producers and Marvin G. Westmore and Michael S. Pack, world-renowned makeup artists of the Westmore Academy, donated all of the materials, crew and talent for makeup and special effects. Mr. Pack is an acclaimed special effects artist who has contributed his talents to such programs as *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer, Nip/Tuck, Babylon 5* (Emmy nominated) and *The X Files*. Stunts were under the coordination of Bobby Lento.

A number of cameo performances by familiar faces are expected, but the full details of who would be able to work it into their schedules weren't available as of this writing. See www.GothamCafeTheMovie.com for up-to-date information.

❡ ❡ ❡

After premiering at the Montreal Fantasia Film Festival in early August, RIDING THE BULLET opened in ten major U.S. cities in early October. One of the film's co-stars, Barbara Hershey, went to high school with director Mick Garris's wife, who has a small part in the film playing a nurse named Annie Wilkes. However, Ms. Garris's fate in this movie is better than usual—she was the woman in the bathtub in *The Shining*—and better than that of her character's namesake, too. The movie, which Garris describes as his favorite directorial experience to date, was shot in forty-five days. Seventeen of these "days" were actually 5 pm to 6 am night shoots during the cold dark Vancouver winter.

A reviewer from horror fan website *The Horror Carnival* posted his review of the premiere via Quint at *Ain't It Cool News*. At the film festival premiere, Garris described how some personal tragedies in his life inspired him to undertake this film, where a character with an outlook that the world is about death comes to realize that there is meaning to life. The reviewer, who travels under the name Ringmaster Bent, said the film might inspire you to appreciate what you have, especially your mother. Garris brought his mother to the premiere—a first.

Ringmaster Bent says the movie is character driven and perhaps slightly lacking in the horror elements people might expect, especially in the first half. He griped that David Arquette was too wild and comical for the overall tone of the film, which is a movie with comedic elements rather than a comedy.

RIDING THE BULLET'S soundtrack is comprised of music by the likes of The Zombies, Electric Prunes, E Nation Jack and James Brown.

By the time you read this, an edited-for-TV version will have debuted on USA Network,

with plans underway for an unrated DVD release.

† † †

Jerad Walters' Centipede Press has published a 300-copy signed limited edition of *'Salem's Lot*. In addition to the novel, the volume includes two related short stories from *Night Shift*—"Jerusalem's Lot" and "One for the Road"—as well as King's introduction from the Pocket Books edition (printed as an Afterword) and nearly fifty pages of deleted and modified scenes from the original manuscript, never before published.

The book is illustrated with 300-line screen duotone photographs by Jerry Uelsmann that "perfectly capture the loneliness and metaphysical aspect of *'Salem's Lot*." Walters wanted the book to be a real limited edition, something unique, but also decided on a relatively low print run for the signed edition because he couldn't envision asking two strangers (King and Uelsmann) to sit down and sign over a thousand signature sheets.

The 566-page book (9 x 13" trim) was printed in offset lithography on Mohawk Superfine paper, which Walters describes as "the finest alpha-cellulose uncoated sheet in the United States." Numbered copies, bound in black Japanese cotton over archival boards, are slipcased, and the traycased deluxe edition is bound in Chieftain Goatskin from the UK. Walters told Brian Freeman in a *Cemetery Dance Weekly* newsletter interview, "This is a good leather that is made with the old tanning techniques, no longer in use in the United States, that ensure the leather will be safe and durable for books. I considered doing the entire edition in leather but the price is just too much and that is a lot of dead animals to account for. The paper for the deluxe is Saunders Waterford, which is a mouldmade paper from the UK. This paper has a fine deckled edge which is really going to look nice in the book, and is a good cotton rag paper. There was another paper I wanted to use, a paper from the Czech Republic whose co-owner, about 700 years ago, was burned at the stake for witchcraft, but the quantities were just too small and the paper too expensive. Nevertheless, it is those little details that, when used, give a book an extra dimension."

This past June, I spoke with Walters about this project by e-mail, asking him first about his personal relationship with *'Salem's Lot*. "In November 1979 the Tobe Hooper film aired on TV, part one on a Saturday. The next day, on Sunday, I found the tie-in Signet paperback edition. The film was pretty good to my ten-year-old eyes, and the book was even better. The combination was an earth shaking experience, in a way, because it gave me an idea of what I wanted to do with my life. The first idea was to be a writer, but I quickly found out that I was not cut out for that sort of life. Publishing and design have always held a stronger interest."

Walters began Cocytus Press in 2001 and published *Stigmata: An Anthology of Writing and Art* of which Walters says, "The idea for this was an anthology that would be a little different than your usual anthology. The eclectic mixture of authors still puts off a few people." He created the imprint Centipede Press (named after a combination of his fascination with insects and a 1970s progressive rock band called Centipede) for *'Salem's Lot* and all future limited editions "because no one knew what the hell Cocytus meant or where it came from."

In 2002, with his wife's encouragement, Walters sent a copy of *Stigmata* to King along with his carefully drafted proposal for the *'Salem's Lot* limited edition. A few weeks later he received a message that King was considering the idea and ultimately he received permission to go ahead.

I commented that the edition reminded me of a DVD with its related featurettes and deleted scenes. He responded, "Anyone can go buy a paperback of *'Salem's Lot* for $7 and a book of Jerry Uelsmann photos for another $20. So the question was, how do I do something special for this edition? Photographs make it special, of course, although it took a long time to find a photographer whose work would fit in well with the book. Plus I felt I wanted someone new for the book. J.K. Potter has done King books and so have many of the other established fantasy and horror artists, and living wood engravers, such as Barry Moser, were just too expensive. Mr. Uelsmann is known as a fine art photographer whose darkroom techniques are unequalled. Many of the photos for *'Salem's Lot* go back a long way, back to the early 1960s. The idea was to do the novel with photos and then the idea of including the 'sequel' to *'Salem's Lot*, 'One for the Road,' was just too irresistible to pass up. And if you do that, why not the so-called 'prequel,' 'Jerusalem's Lot?' While we're at it, why not include the introduction from the Pocket Books edition?

"The idea of putting the cut scenes in was totally influenced from today's DVDs, as you say. Plus, I don't think anyone had done that before. I mean, they have Dostoevsky's notebooks published, but nothing like this for a popular living writer. The only other thing that could be done, and would probably prove impossible, would be to have 'author's commentary,' like on a DVD. This would be in the form of side notes throughout the text. Obviously, such an idea is infeasible."

Walters feels that the book's presentation is very important. "At $470 for a cloth edition and nearly a thousand bucks for the leather, the production values had better be top notch. The book is nearly 600 pages and the paper needs to be of high quality. But the bindery work is equally important for a book this huge. The people I am working with there are taking extra steps to make sure the binding is very strong, far stronger than any standard trade or limited edition. As far as design goes, I am more influenced by fine press books than limited edition books. Of all the King limiteds that I have seen, Michael Alpert's design for *Eyes of the Dragon* is far and away the best. This book is one of the few that I have seen that combines fine press sensibility with limited edition collectability. Most limited editions are too over-designed. The design for *Eyes*, and the upcoming *'Salem's Lot*, is very minimal, almost spartan. The page itself is based on the ISO proportion of 5:7, while the typeblock is based on the proportion of 1:1.5, which corresponds to a perfect musical fifth. Folios are set sensibly in the bottom corners of the page, with no running heads or anything like that at the top; who needs to be reminded of the author's name on every single page?"

Upcoming for Centipede Press is a collection of science fiction stories by Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore called *Two Handed Engine*. It is a 900-page retrospective of their career. Another book in production is a collection of essays on the 1922 German film NOSFERATU. Walters is also considering a series of

large hardcovers called *Masters of the Weird Tale* which would start with public domain material and go on from there.

Centipede Press's website is, as you might guess, www.centipedepress.com.

† † †

THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION finally got the full treatment on DVD. Warner Home Video released two new deluxe sets of the Frank Darabont adaptation of "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption" from *Different Seasons*. Although not a box office hit, the film went on to garner multiple Oscar nominations (including Best Picture) and became one of the biggest home video hits of the 1990s.

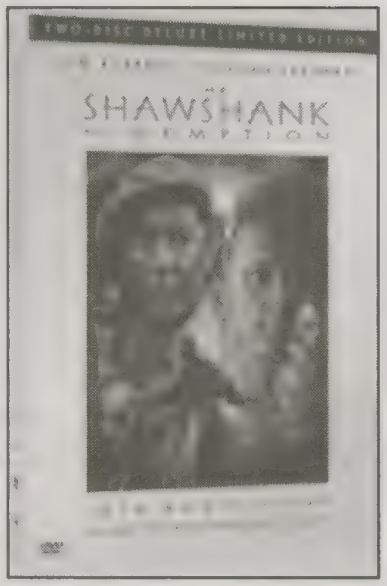
The standard edition contains two discs and features a 1.85 anamorphic transfer, a Dolby Digital 5.1 surround track and new audio commentary track with Darabont. The second disc contains two new 45-minute documentaries, *The Charlie Rose Show* episode featuring Darabont, Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman, plus storyboard and still galleries, the SHARK TANK REDEMPTION short film spoof, theatrical trailers and ROM extras to be announced. The deluxe limited edition three-disc set features a collectible slipcase package, a new book by Mark Kermode on the making of the film, and Thomas Newman's original soundtrack on CD. Retail is $26.95 and $44.95, respectively.

To help prime the pump for the new DVD, there was a special two-week limited theatrical re-release in selected cities.

† † †

While he was working on *A Brief History of Time*, his publisher told Stephen Hawking that every equation in the book would cut the readership in half, so I apologize in advance to *Cemetery Dance* for mutilating 50% of its readers.

You know how people are always saying certain movies are formulaic? Until now, no one has ever worked out what the formula is. Researchers hired by the British channel Sky Movies watched scores of horror movies and came up with the following to explain the secret behind scary movies, designed to give perfect results every time:



$(es+u+cs+t)^2 +s+ (tl+f)/2 + (a+dr+fs)/n + \sin x - 1.$

Suspense is created by escalating music (es), the unknown (u), chase scenes (cs) and the sense of being trapped (t), the sum of which is squared before shock (s) is added. To be terrifying, a film has to find a balance between true life (tl) and fantasy (f). A small cast can increase the shock effect, so the formula has a term that describes if characters are alone (a), in a dark environment (dr) and the film's setting (fs), which is then divided by the number of characters (n).

Mathematicians said there was also a maximum level of gore beyond which a movie becomes average; therefore, the last term incorporates blood and guts (Sin x) and subtracts from it the stereotypes (1). Based on their formula, they found that Kubrick version of THE SHINING is the perfect horror film.

Zone Notes

King's speech at the National Book Awards banquet in 2003 was issued on CD and cassette audio in August under the title *Building Bridges*.

Owen King, King's youngest son, recently signed with Bloomsbury to publish a short story and novella collection called *We're All in This Together*.

Production is at long last under way for Mick Garris's three-hour adaptation of DESPERATION. Based on King's screenplay, the film began shooting in Arizona on September 14th and is expected to wrap by February 2005.

Columbia issued a special edition DVD of CHRISTINE on September 28th, with a suggested retail price of about $20. As well as a 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen transfer and both English and French Dolby Surround tracks, the disc includes an audio commentary with director John Carpenter and actor Keith Gordon, twenty deleted and alternate scenes, and three exclusive new featurettes.

Another recent debut is a DVD reissue of CHILDREN OF THE CORN with an audio commentary track (with director Fritz Kiersch, producer Terrence Kirby and actors John Franklin and Courtney Gains), the all-new "Harvesting Horror" documentary, storyboard and title sequence art galleries, a poster and still gallery, the theatrical trailer and the original screenplay via DVD-ROM.

Look, too, for CREEPSHOW 2 with an audio commentary by director Michael Gornick, a documentary entitled NIGHTMARES IN FOAM RUBBER, storyboard and still galleries, theatrical trailers and the original screenplay via DVD-ROM. Producer Gabriel Grunfeld (THE STEPFORD WIVES) is reportedly working on a feature adaptation of the original CREEPSHOW stories, perhaps with an eye toward a TV series down the line.

As the abbreviated third season of USA Network's *The Dead Zone* wound down, there were unconfirmed rumors that the show may be back as early as January for a "season 3.5." The show's soundtrack album is now available, including the Jeff Buckley theme song "New Year's Prayer" and "Hallelujah" performed by star Anthony Michael Hall. The first two seasons are available as DVD boxed sets. Hall wears many hats for the series and got his

first chance to direct an episode during season three, "The Cold Hard Truth" starring Richard Lewis as an acerbic talk radio host.

THE TALISMAN is on again. No, it's off again. No...on! No...off! It's a crapshoot, take your pick, but as I write this, the Spielberg production is off again. Scheduled to begin filming this past fall, the adaptation suffered the loss of its second director this year and the production office in Vancouver closed up shop, never a good sign. Of course the situation could be different by the time you read this. It's enough to make a person's head spin. I think this movie's fundamental problem is the script and until they go back to ground zero this adaptation won't get off the ground.

I know I've mentioned this previously, but if you haven't already you should do yourself a favor and check out *The Devil's Wine*, a collection of poetry by renowned horror authors, edited by Tom Piccirilli and published in a lavish edition by Cemetery Dance Publications. The contributors include King (half a dozen rare poems from his college days), Ray Bradbury, Peter Straub, Jack Ketchum, Edward Lee, Charles de Lint, T.M. Wright and Piccirilli. The poems are not generally horrific, though some of them are dark. The book was favorably reviewed in *Publishers Weekly*, who called it a "rich feast." While you're at it, try out Tom Piccirilli's novel *A Choir of Ill Children*, a fascinating dark and poetic tale set in the southern swamplands that is virtually impossible to summarize in fewer words than the book itself.

Carrie will finally be available as an audiobook and who better to read it than original film actress Sissy Spacek? Release date is February 2005.

In the "you know you've made it when" department: The Lowell Spinners issued 1500 Stephen King Bobble Heads at a game at LeLacheur Park against the Tri-City Valleycats on Friday, August 13th, following up a tradition started last year with the Jack Kerouac Bobble Head. King is depicted standing on three stacked books (*The Dark Tower*, *The Green Mile*, and *The Dead Zone*, titles reportedly selected by King), wearing jeans, a Red Sox jersey, glasses, and a Spinners hat. The Red Sox jersey has "King" across the back and the No. 13 for Friday the 13th. From the photograph I saw of the bobble head, if they hadn't told me who it was supposed to be, I might not have guessed. *Tank McNamara* featured a more accurate representation of King in a Bobble Head-themed comic strip series in July in which the figurine wreaks havoc on a ball field and pitching machine. The day after the game, a dozen of the figurines were for sale on eBay.

For a little while it looked like Dakota Fanning (TAKEN) would be THE GIRL WHO LOVED TOM GORDON. However, after her success with MAN ON FIRE, she signed with a new manager who lured her away from the project. Director George Romero told *Ain't It Cool News*, "Steve loves [Romero's adaptation], I love it, we really want to do it, but it's not an obvious thing for either one of us." Laura Dern has been cast as Tricia's mother. Romero also told an interviewer that he's been asked if he wanted to contribute to a TV series being contemplated based on stories from *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*.

The recent TNT adaptation (reinterpretation, I might say) of *'Salem's Lot* was released on Warner DVD. The miniseries is presented in 1.77:1 anamorphic widescreen along with English Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround tracks. *Lot* Producer Mark Wolper and scriptwriter Peter Filardi are planning to do a two-hour version of *It* for TNT/Warner Bros. Television.

Shawn Lealos, director of the dollar baby adaptation of "I Know What You Need" from *Night Shift*, he has scrapped all of his old footage due to unspecified problems with cast and crew that could not be fixed. He was prepared to begin a new shoot and has recast every role except for two. Lealos also rewrote the script, adding a new character unique to the movie to make things flow better. Lealos's web site is http://starvingdogs.biz.

Kamran Syed is making a Dollar Baby of the one-page science fiction story "I've Got to Get Away" from a youthful King's self-published collaboration with Chris Cavalier, *People, Places and Things*. He plans to take a week for filming and have it finished by sometime in 2005. Production is also under way on an adaptation of THE ROAD VIRUS HEADS NORTH by Ohio native David Brock, and no fewer than three different teams are adapting "All That You Love Will be Carried Away," one of which was done under the title THE SECRET TRANSIT CODES OF AMERICA'S HIGHWAYS.

Given all the activity in this realm lately, James Renner—director of one of the "All That You Love" adaptations—organized the first annual "Dollar Baby" Short Movie Festival, on September 25th at the University of Maine in Orono. The event, which featured over two hours of rarely seen adaptations of King's short fiction, was open to the public, with all profits going to the Wavedancer Foundation. He planned to have a Q&A session with all the directors after the screenings.

King contributed an entry to *The Future Dictionary of America*, a book that brought authors and artists together to promote progressive causes in the November election. The book is an imagining of what a dictionary might look like about thirty years hence, "when all or most of the world's problems are solved and our current president is a distant memory." According to the publisher (who also did last year's *Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*), "The book is by turns funny, outraged, utopian, and dyspeptic." Over 150 writers contributed, including: Stephen King, Glen David Gold, Jonathan Franzen, Joyce Carol Oates, Paul Auster, Aimee Bender and Michael Chabon. It also includes a CD with new songs and rarities from David Byrne, R.E.M., Tom Waits, They Might Be Giants, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and others. King's contribution was "sloudge," his term for "overweight white men" seated around "shiny tables" and mouthing off against the liberal state.

End Zone

Next time, I will have critical and general reaction to *The Dark Tower* and RIDING THE BULLET, hope to have more about *Faithful* and should have lots to report about GOTHAM CAFÉ. *The Illustrated Stephen King Trivia Book*, edited by myself and Brian Freeman and featuring a batch of absolutely killer Glenn Chadbourne illustrations, should be out by then, too. See you in the Dead Zone!

Do you have King news? If so, e-mail BevVincent@BevVincent.com. You can also FAX items c/o Cemetery Dance at 410-569-2449. Next time you're on the 'net, check out my web site: www.BevVincent.com. The message board has breaking news threads and also a little bit about my projects.

S& MAN

JT Petty

Filmed when he was 20, JT Petty's feature, Soft For Digging, played Sundance and festivals worldwide. The film was followed by Mimic Sentinel for Dimension Films. JT has written many videogames, including the first two *Splinter Cell* titles, which he helped create. His videogame adaptation of *Batman Begins* will be released simultaneously with the movie this summer. His first children's novel, *Clemency Pogue: Fairy Killer*, will be released by Simon & Schuster in May. JT lives in New York; though he's nervous about saying where, exactly.

The first email read:

From: wnderlaaand@yahoo.com
Sent: Sat 09/13/2003 3:00 AM
To: mail@softfordigging.com
Cc:
Subject: how can I watch?

Is there a DVD I could buy??? Or will there be any screenings in NYC???

Brian
>
>
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The "mail@" address line meant he had found me by clicking the *contact* button on my website.

I sent him my standard response, talking about the difficulty of distributing an independent film without being exploited, and promising to put him on the list of folks to notify once distribution came together. I mentioned that I lived in Brooklyn.

Brian responded:

From: wnderlaaand@yahoo.com
Sent: Sun 09/14/2003 11:19 AM
To: mail@softfordigging.com
Cc:
Subject: RE: how can I watch?

Thanks for getting back at me, man, that's awesome!! Bruce Cambell responds to his emails to and gets tons of cred for it on the chat rooms. Totally add me to that list.

Brian Newell
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Brian wrote me an email every other week for the next three months. He asked about updates on the movie, other projects I was working on, what kinds of horror movies I liked to watch, and so on. I told him about a straight-to-video giant cockroach movie I had made, currently available in most video stores. He rented it, watched it, and sent me a four-page email that spent equal time praising my "eye for murder" and assuring me that he wasn't blowing smoke up my ass.

Brian Googled me and discovered other work I had done, screenplays for videogames, short stories, other film work. He played my most popular game, a globetrotting espionage shoot-'em-up, and sent me another epic email, again gushing like a ruptured sugar barrel.

I have a shameful soft spot for compliments, and encouraged Brian, modestly dropping hints that would lead him to find other projects I had worked on, pen-names I had used and so on. Nearly every other sentence he typed ended in doubled exclamation points, "!!," which began to appear to me as the iconic representation of a baby rabbit, reduced to two pin-point eyes and parallel vertical lines for ears. I began to play Daddy Rabbit, seeing how many baby rabbits I could induce Brian to include in one email.

He started suggesting a face-to-face meeting, which I always declined by excuse of being out of town. Every time a Fangoria convention happened within the Tri-State area, he would send me an invitation, letting me know where his booth (he sold bootleg videos) would be located.

Pretending like he was twisting my arm, I mailed him a VHS tape of my first film, an as-yet-unreleased independent horror film about a hermit who witnesses a murder.

In response, he then sent me the kind of email that usually give me 'tarded tingles, a shiver of sympathetic embarrassment down my spine. But still I encouraged him because I was so thoroughly charmed. It was the kind of email that usually begins, "So I've got this idea for my own movie..."

From: wnderlaaand@yahoo.com
Sent: Wed 12/17/2003 12:09 PM
To: mail@softfordigging.com
Cc:
Subject: Dead And Gone

I wasn't sure until now but now I am, you're the real deal, man!! Its really slow starting and I thought about turning it off but am totally glad I stuck around for the way it ends!! But my favorite part, was how halfway through when the girl is dead and nobody believes the old bathrobe guy saw her get killed. Where did you get the idea for that come from?? I've had this idea for a long time that's exactly like that!! And I was thinking maybe we got the idea from the same place?? How funny

would that be!! 'Cause I think that would be an awesome idea for a movie!! What do you think??

Brian
>
>
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I sent him a response admitting that the "misbelieved witness" was a fairly standard horror trope, and supposing that there must be some explanation. Maybe, I suggested, it was related to a horror audience's role as a helpless spectator; and a character in the same situation would be the most sympathetic possible. Or maybe, I suggested, "everybody gets the idea from the same place you and I did."

From: wnderlaaand@yahoo.com
Sent: Sun 12/21/2003 8:12 PM
To: mail@softfordigging.com
Cc:
Subject: RE: Dead And Gone

I knew it, man!! Now you totally need to look at my videos!! Can you come to the next Fango convention?? I can give you a bunch, maybe we could make some kind of hollywood thing, right??

Brian
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Argh. Brian was giving me the 'tarded tingles something fierce, so I started to pull away. I told him that I probably wouldn't be hitting any Fangoria conventions any time soon, said I was sorry to miss out on the opportunity to see his videos.

From: wnderlaaand@yahoo.com
Sent: Sun 12/21/2003 11:52 PM
To: mail@softfordigging.com
Cc:
Subject: RE: Dead And Gone

No problem, man, I can mail you the tapes. What's your address??

Brian
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>
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I sent him my P.O. Box.

When I returned to New York after the holidays, I found four DVDs waiting for me. The packaging was home designed, and titled as parts eleven through fourteen of "S& Man." A purple Post-it note on the first box read, "ENJOY!! -Brian."

Part Eleven opens on a crowd in Springtime Manhattan, possibly a weekend morning on Broadway, somewhere south of Houston Street. The image is shot on video, and handheld. A superimposed title comes up that reads,

"S&MAN, PART 11"

The title fades out and the camera begins to move forward. It must be a small camera, because none of the people on the street notice it or look into the lens.

The image stops, zooms in on a subject, and finds wavering focus on an attractive young woman with black hair. Another superimposed title comes on screen,

"Brenda Allison Potts"

The video cuts to a moving shot of Brenda walking down a far less populated street later in the day, oblivious that she is being followed. Then, barely visible through the window of a used bookshop, Brenda browses the shelves. We follow her as she walks through Washington Square Park, having a cheerful cell phone conversation we can't hear; she laughs and lets the wind blow her hair. She wanders through a grocery store, buying pasta and sauce. The camera lingers lovingly on her careful selection of a bright orange bell pepper. She runs into a friend, a young man whom she warmly embraces; he seems shy and withdrawn. She sits alone in a coffee shop, drinking something expensive and frothy, reading her book.

The montage quickens, presenting five-second snippets of her life that paint a remarkably full portrait. She lives in a four-story walk-up on Avenue B. She has many friends, and rarely spends an evening alone. She is shown once kissing a young man (not the shy one) in Buddy Holly glasses on a street corner, but they part there and he doesn't seem to have yet achieved boyfriend status. She takes yoga classes. She works for an advertising agency on Mercer Street. Her best friend is a heavy-set Asian woman that a superimposed title labels as "Kim."

We watch Brenda through the window of her apartment, possibly from a rooftop across the street. She watches television, spends hours on the phone, dances while she prepares herself simple dinners.

We watch Brenda get up from her table at her regular coffee shop and duck into the washroom. The camera moves towards the bag she left behind and a superimposed title reads:

"Brenda Loses her Keys."

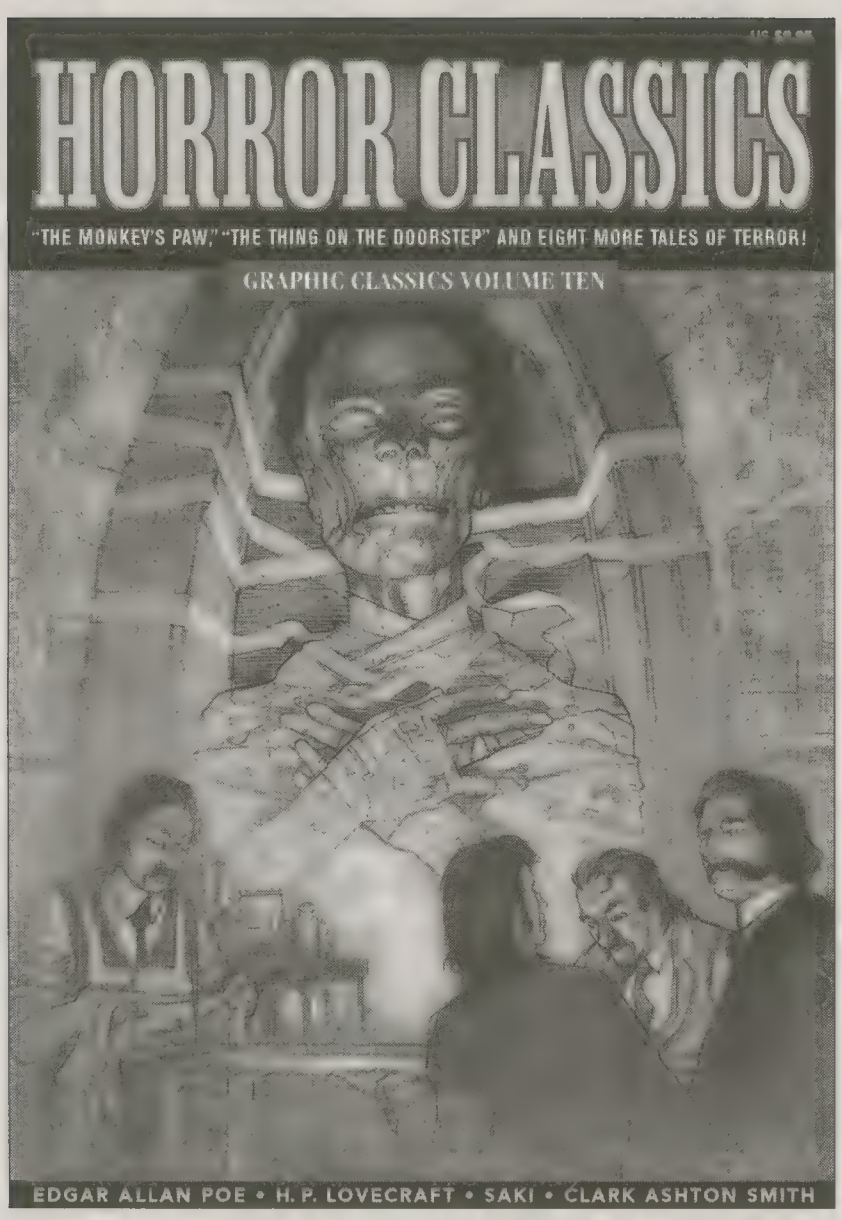
Abruptly, we cut to inside Brenda's apartment. Still handheld, the camera pans slowly around. Through a doorway, in a bathroom mirror, we catch a glimpse of the cameraman. He is out of focus, but there's enough information in the image to reveal a large Caucasian man.

We sort through her mail. The camera leans in to focus on the name "Brenda A. Potts" on a phone bill. We find a college diploma (Vassar) framed on a wall, and know already that the "A." stands for "Allison."

In her small kitchen, a man's hand enters the frame, plucks a drinking glass from the sink, and holds it up to the light. A lip-shaped smudge marks the rim.

In her bathroom, the same hand rummages through the trash but finds nothing worth collecting. The hand pulls some hairs from a brush retrieved from behind the mirror (in which we catch another glimpse of the cameraman, one loose, pale, unshaven jowl). The hand presses a finger against the sink's edge and triumphantly rises to show two slivers of fingernail pressed into the pad.

Back in the kitchen, we see a box of cereal standing on top of a wall cabinet. The hand holds up a thumb tack with glue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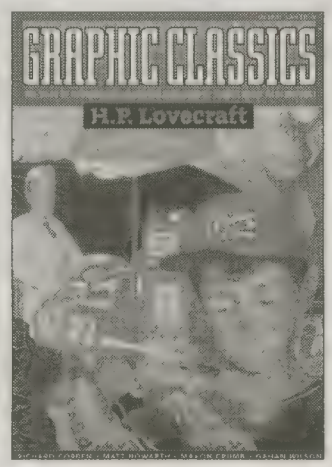

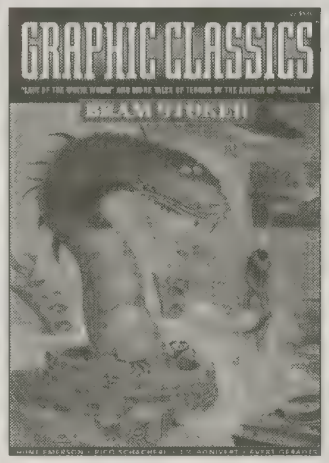

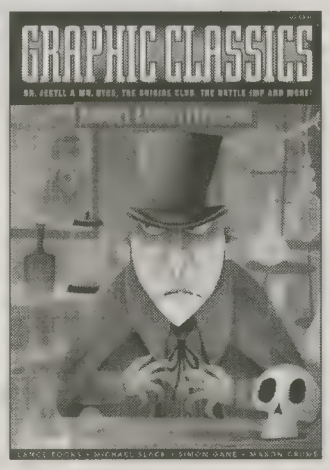

on its head for the camera to see, then reaches up and fastens it, point up, on the cabinet's edge. The hand reaches past and pushes the box of cereal back towards the wall, making it more difficult to reach.

We cut back to the Peeping Tom's view of her apartment from across the street. It's a few moments before dawn and Brenda blearily assembles her breakfast. She stands on her tip-toes, trying to reach the cereal box on top of the cabinet. Then she jumps back as if bitten, looks at her finger, puts it in her mouth, and runs to the bathroom. The camera shakes as if unable to suppress a laugh.

Later in the day, back in Brenda's apartment, the hand fishes a bloody tissue from the trash can.

We cut suddenly to a chase through Grand Central Station. The camera bobs erratically through a crowd, only just catching Brenda boarding a train.

We watch New Jersey scroll by through the train window.

Suburban nighttime, we watch Brenda eating with her family. She sits with her father, a Latino woman (step-mother?) and a younger brother. They say grace before they eat. Brenda talks through most of dinner.

She gets back on the train and returns to New York City.

Intercut with Brenda's life, we watch the construction of a doll, beginning with a child's toy, the plastic hair ripped from its head and the glass eyes plucked out. Brenda runs into the boy she kissed on the street corner, now accompanied by several friends; they joke around and laugh, but Brenda avoids Buddy Holly's glances. The hair taken from Brenda's comb is wrapped around the doll's head, tied beneath its chin. Brenda and her best friend Kim argue in a diner, then make up tearfully, hugging on the sidewalk. The lip of the drinking glass is broken off, the jagged crescent glued over the doll's own mouth. Brenda drinks with co-workers, a collection of attractive young people in business suits downing cocktails. Brenda on her cell phone, always talking, always laughing. The doll's fingers are melted slightly over a candle flame and the two slivers of fingernails pressed into the soft plastic. Brenda brings the boy she kissed to her apartment and turns out the lights. The hand holds the doll's breast over the candle-flame until a soft hole melts into the plastic; the hand presses the bloody tissue into the hole, then seals the wound with a Band-Aid.

We cut to a formal portrait of the doll, propped against a blank yellow wall as if for execution. It's a horrible effigy of broken glass, dead scraps, and burnt plastic.

The doll is placed in a shoe box half-filled with dark soil. The hand levels a scoop of soil over the doll.

Brenda walks up Broadway, people bump into her, then scowl and shake their heads as they walk away.

The hand levels another scoop of soil over the doll.

Brenda runs after Kim, calling out to her. She has to grab Kim's shoulder before her friend turns to her. It takes Kim a few seconds to recognize Brenda.

The hand levels another scoop of soil over the doll.

Brenda has a series of increasingly angry cell phone conversations. On the sixth, she throws her phone to the ground in frustration.

The hand levels another scoop of soil over the doll, covering it to the collarbone.

Security at Brenda's office escorts her from the building. Brenda talks frantically at the boy she kissed; he watches her talk, honestly bewildered, then walks away shaking his head and apologizing.

The hand levels a final scoop of soil over the doll, covering it completely.

Brenda has a similar shouting session with Kim. Kim puts her hands up and backs away, confused and frightened. People on the street bump into Brenda, and continue on their way without so much as a glance.

Brenda tries to fit her key into the lock of the building where she lives. She cries and stomps her foot in frustration; she is dirty and exhausted, looks as if she hasn't bathed in days. She presses her hand flat against the panel of buzzers until the building's superintendent escorts her from the stoop.

Next, even from across the train car, we can tell Brenda is crying from her reflection in the glass.

Brenda stands on the step of her parents' house, her father standing firmly in the doorway, not allowing her in. He shakes his head apologetically, showing the mixture of bewilderment, anger, and fear that has now become familiar. Brenda attempts to push her way into the house and her father shoves her back and shuts the door. Brenda collapses on the lawn and lies there until the police arrive and take her away.

The rental tag from the car's windshield partially obscures Brenda's exit from the police station the next morning. She is still bedraggled, her hair a mess. She walks a few blocks from the station, sits at a bus stop, and stares into space.

Cut to later that afternoon, Brenda is walking down the side of the road outside of town. Through the windshield of the car, we slowly roll up behind her. The passenger-side window rolls down and the car stops.

"Do you need a ride?" a voice behind the camera asks. It nearly sounds like a child imitating an adult.

Brenda, exhausted, leans down and looks in the car window.

"...Brenda?" says the man's voice, "Brenda Potts?"

Her face lights up with an unbearable moment of hope. She looks past the camera desperately.

"It's Brian!!" the voice says. "We were in third grade together."

"You know me," says Brenda, almost whispering. She scrambles into the car as if from the face of a cliff.

"Yeah!! Brenda Potts, from third grade. I didn't know you were still in town." Brian sounds excited. Brenda shuts the door behind her.

"My name's Brenda," she says.

"Yeah, I know. Are you okay??"

"No," she says. "But you know me."

"What are you doing out here?" Brian asks.

"Can you take me home? Can you tell my parents who I am?"

"I can take you home, sure." Brian pulls a U-turn, and we hear the *ca-chunk* of the doors locking. The camera, hidden somewhere around Brian's belly, stays focused on Brenda, dividing her shell-shocked stare between Brian and the road. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Brenda shakes her head.

"Nobody knows who I am," she says.

"That's kind of existential!!" Brian says. Brenda looks at him, confused by the glee in his voice.

"...I don't remember you," Brenda says.

"It's Brian!! From third grade!!" Brenda looks at him silently. "I put on a little weight since then," Brian says, chuckling.

Brenda looks back out the window.

"But you remember me," she says.

"Sure I do. Brenda Potts," Brian says her name again, she laps it up like somebody dying of thirst. "Hey, could you hand me that bag?" The hand points out a carpenter's bag at Brenda's feet. She leans down, picks it up, and hands it over to Brian.

"Did you sleep with that guy?" Brian asks.

"What?"

"The guy in the glasses. You turned out the lights so I couldn't see." Brian's voice is still jovial, an old acquaintance, a childhood friend.

Brenda starts to breathe heavily. She looks like she's already given up, her head wobbling back and forth on her neck as if she were slowly being shaken by the shoulders.

Brian's hand reaches into frame with a black object the size of a chocolate bar. He pushes it to Brenda's neck, there's an electric blue spark, and then she slumps limp in the passenger seat.

Cut to Brenda waking up on a bed of dry leaves. It's the first hour of dawn, what we call the "magic hour" in movies because the lighting is so naturally beautiful that the entire world becomes precious. Brenda has duct tape wrapped around her head, completely sealing her mouth, bunching her hair against the base of her skull. Her hands are bound together. Her feet are tied as well, although about a foot of rope has been left slack between them.

When the sunlight hits her face, Brenda wakes up. Brian patiently waits, holding the camera. We can see his shadow on the leaves at the screen's edge.

There's enough slack in the rope binding Brenda's ankles to allow her to get to her feet. But she can't take a step longer than a quarter-stride. She shuffles and stumbles away in the arrested gate of a chain-gang criminal. Brian, behind the camera, follows.

She looks back at the camera over and over, clawing at the duck tape on her mouth, making muffled noises barely audible over the crunching of the leaves. She falls a dozen times before she ceases to get up. Brian puts the camera down, and for the first time the image is stable.

Brenda is lying on the ground maybe fifteen feet from the camera. Brian's legs and torso enters frame and walks towards her. Careful not to block the camera's view, Brian strangles her until she goes limp.

We cut to an empty view of the woods, and hold for about ten seconds before cutting to black.

The entire DVD lasted a little under forty minutes. "S& Man" parts twelve through fourteen followed the same pattern. A young woman, usually attractive, was selected, followed for several days, made a stranger to her close friends and family through some kind of remarkably cheesy voodoo, and then murdered on screen. Two of the murders are by strangulation, one is by knife, and one is by bathtub drowning.

I watched all four DVDs, then tried to go to sleep. I gave up after a few hours and watched the four DVDs again.

The differences between the four women in the first half of each movie were drastic. By the end of each movie, however, they had all become the same victim. None of them reacted outside of the pattern once Brian had finished construction of the dolls.

Over the next week, I got very little work done. I watched "S& Man" nearly daily, always stopping each movie twenty minutes in, just before Brian finished construction of the dolls.

I Googled the four girls, and found nothing about them. I found the yoga studio where Brenda Allison Potts studied, but their records showed no such student.

Several days later, Brian wrote.

From: wnderlaaand@yahoo.com
Sent: Tue 1/06/2004 8:12 PM
To: mail@softfordigging.com
Cc:
Subject: SO??

Did you get the tapes, man?? I can't wait to hear what you think. I'm not a professional filmmaker like you or anything, but I think they look pretty all right. Could be an awesome TV show, don't you think?? Or maybe even a movie!! We need to get together and plan this out, man, it could be huge. I'm already pulling in pretty great cash just from selling these things at the conventions!! I quit my job and everything, was able to buy a pretty phat Mac setup for cutting these things together. I've got a bunch more episodes of "S& Man," and I'm making more all the time. I know you want more!!

Brian
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>
>

I wrote Brian, saying that I loved the movies, they were scary as hell, and I wanted to talk to him about the possibility of maybe doing a movie about him. The first step would be a series of interviews that I wanted to videotape. I suggested we meet at the upcoming Fangoria convention happening January 11th in New Jersey.

I met him at his booth at the convention. Brian looked much as he did on tape, an overweight, extremely pale man in his early twenties. He had not shaved in probably a week, but was only able to grow hair on his neck and the underside of his chin. My greatest impression of him was an overwhelming, child-like enthusiasm for life. He shook my hand for an uncomfortably long time and would not stop grinning at me.

His "S& Man" DVDs were priced at $50 apiece, and he sold over forty of them in the half-hour we stood by the booth talking. His customers, all ages but nearly all men, had the demeanor of businessmen in a strip club. They avoided eye contact with one another, smirked guardedly at Brian's jovial banter, and stared at the merchandise with eyes as dead as a slaughtered cow's. They seemed to suffer a need.

Brian and I agreed to conduct our interview after the convention's closing, so I booked us a room in the hotel.

I recorded nearly four hours of conversation between myself and Brian. He was nervous in front of the camera, painfully eager to be liked, embarrassingly gratuitous in his compliments.

It was difficult to keep him on track, and our conversation frequently swerved into me trying to steer him away from describing how impressed he was with the child's murder in my first film, or how graphically a giant cockroach dissected a living victim in my second.

Some excerpts from our conversation, after I had grown tired enough to be direct:

JT: So why aren't they snuff films?

Brian: Oh come on. *(laughter)*

JT: It's a person dying on screen, and it's real, right?

Brian: Well yeah, it's real because I filmed it. But they're not *(laughter)*...snuff.

JT: Why not?

Brian: I mean, it's...snuff films are real people getting killed. The girls in Sand Man aren't real.

JT: But you said you really killed them.

Brian: Right. Just like you really killed that little girl's character.

JT: I didn't kill her. She was pretending.

Brian: Yeah, but her character died.

JT: Sure.

Brian: So you killed her character.

JT: It's not the same.

Brian: It totally was. Like, watching her die was just like being there. That's what was so cool about it, like how you shot it from way far away but still real close, 'cause that's exactly what it's like.

JT; But we didn't hurt the actress. It's make-believe.

Brian: Right. And I didn't hurt any real people in Sand Man because the girls aren't real.

JT: You mean because nobody recognizes them?

Brian: They're not real.

JT: Are they real when the movie starts? Before all the voodoo shit?

Brian: Well they're on screen aren't they? You can see them.

JT: That doesn't mean anything, I can still see them even after you've decided that they're not real.

Brian: Well there you go.

JT: There I go what? I don't understand.

Brian: Are they real?

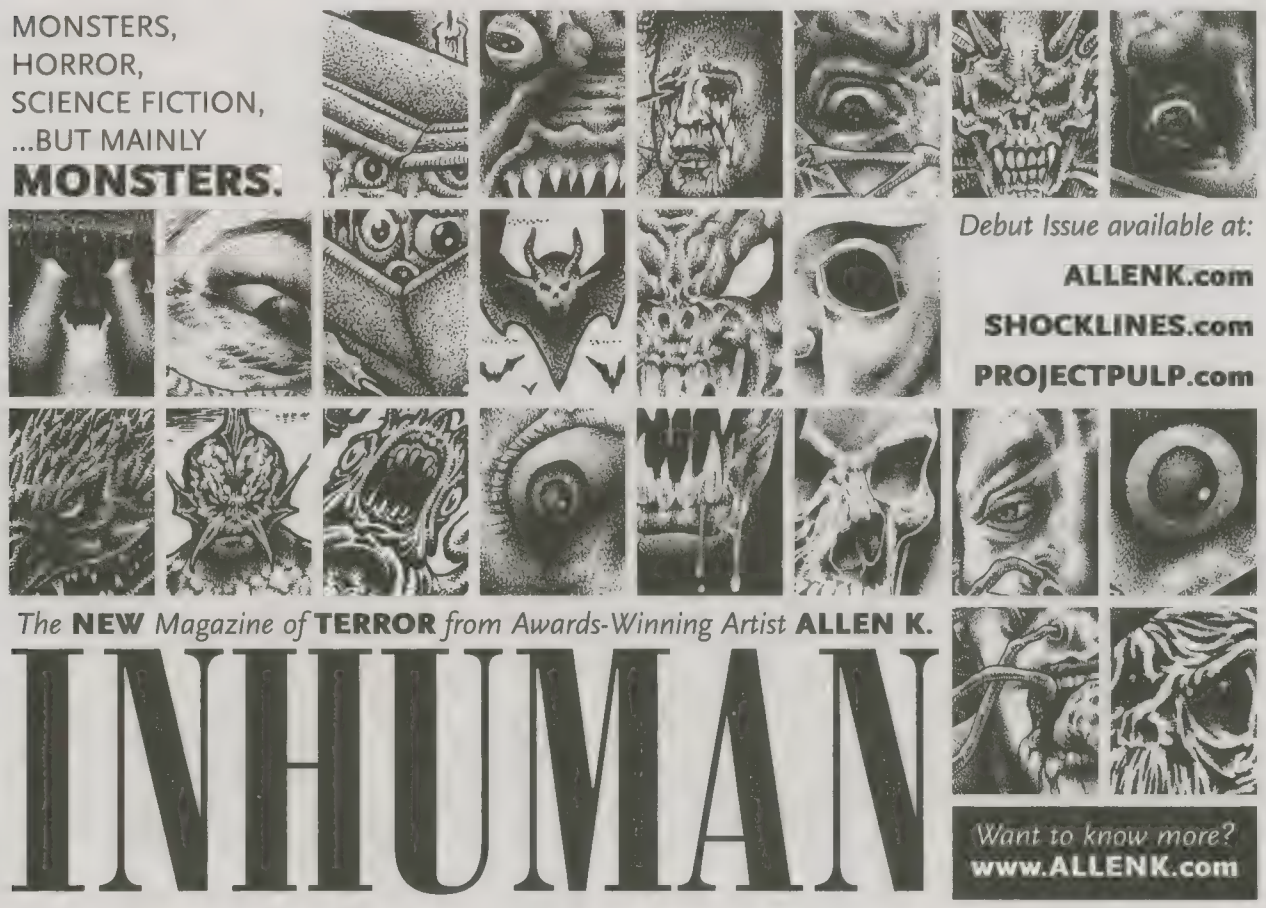
JT: I'm asking you.

So our conversation went for hours. I asked him if he was worried about getting caught, and Brian said no.

"If there were laws against killing imaginary people, you'd be in jail a heck of a lot sooner than I would," he laughed.

Brian says he has so far only cut together twenty-seven episodes of "S& Man," though he has the raw footage for at least forty.

I have about ten hours of my own footage, the taped interview with Brian, plus the complete S& Man episodes 1-14. I want desperately to cut them together into one story, to edit them into some kind of structure that I can understand and put on a screen in front of strangers. I think it would be a good way to start sleeping through the night again. But I haven't even begun cutting; I still just passively watch the episodes over and over again. Brian emails me weekly, asking for my most recent thoughts on a Hollywood movie version. He seems to be getting impatient. Recently, I lost my keys.



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THOMAS F. MONTELEONE

THE MOTHERS AND FATHERS ITALIAN ASSOCIATION

Any Way You Slice It, It's Still Just a Loaf...

Your column was vastly informative and entertaining, as always. I love your writing so much, it's almost pathological! Your father's response to the comic's cover with the man ringing the bell with his wife's head, that's priceless. He raised you right, that's for sure.

–Mark Lancaster

MAFIA is quite a collection of work and personally I do find it inspiring, I have already learned more from it than anything my professor's taught me. If they had had balls even a quarter the size of yours they still wouldn't have been able to walk a straight line.

–Richard Couse

I save your MAFIA columns for brain-fried nights when I need a laugh. Great stuff, but you knew that already.

–T. Liam McDonald

STOP THE PRESSES!

Here's a bulletin just in. I am very happy to report that my collection of columns (the most recent of which you are now reading) entitled *The Mothers And Father Italian Association* was awarded the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Non-fiction.[1] If you have not bought a copy yet, you're doing yourself a big disservice, and to celebrate the award, Borderlands Press is offering remaining copies at a 25% discount! So call 800-528-3310 to get it at this special price. If you go to the website, I'm told the automated "shopping cart" software doesn't recognize the discount. But you can order by email at sales@borderlandspress.com and mention the notice here for your 25% off regular price.

Okay, now...back to our regularly scheduled programming.

So, today I figured we'd talk about Writers Conferences, and as usual, the best way to do that in this venue is to tie it into a story from your Padrone's checkered past.

It all started when I get a call from an old buddy of mine, Joe Citro, who's been writing all his life and lives up in Burlington, Vermont. Joe wrote some really good novels in the late Eighties and early Nineties, then moved on to become the Frank Edwards of his age,[2] and has written five or six great non-fiction tomes about Weird New England Stuff. He's been a friend of Steve Bissette's for a long, long time, and I think that's how I originally met him...at some convention or another, maybe NECON.

The point of Joe's call was to ask me if I'd be interested in being a writer-in-residence at one of the Breadloaf writers conferences which occur yearly on the campus of Vermont's poshy Middlebury College. It paid decently, plus you got a nice room and all your meals and a chance to even hustle a few books. This particular conference in the Breadloaf series was called the *New England Young Writer's Conference at Breadloaf*, and I told Joe no problem—hook me up.

But it wasn't as easy as that...as I soon discovered.

After Joe sent in my name to the guy running the NEYWCatB, I get a call from him. (I think his name was Ted...so we'll call him that, okay?) He wanted me to send him my "vitae,"[3] before they could seriously consider me as a candidate to lecture and mentor at their conference. Then he adds: "Mr. Citro informed us that you had published more than 30 books, and we felt we might need some documentation of that." (Which was a not too veiled way of saying: *who the fuck are you; and how the hell did you publish so many books; and how come we've never*

[1] *Actually, I was a two-fisted winner...Elizabeth and I also won in the Anthology category for* Borderlands 5. *How 'bout that?*

[2] *Frank Edwards was one of the writers who played a major hand in warping my mind and imagination during my Wonder Bread years. He was a journalist and latter day Charles Fort kind of guy, who wrote some absolutely amazing books about weird and mysterious events which were ALL TRUE(!). I loved scarfing up his books as much as Nestle's Crunch bars, and they fired up my imagination like a Bessemer converter. I loved the whole idea of incredibly weird stuff happening all through time and throughout history because when you're a mutant, you really want all that wonderfully creepy stuff to be true. Some of Edwards' classic titles include:* Stranger Than Science, Strange World, Flying Saucers—Serious Business, *and, of course,* Strangest of All. *You can still find these in used books stores or on the internet, and they are great for those quick reads on your favorite porcelain reading chair.*

[3] *This is short for curriculum vitae, which is academese for a résumé or a bio-and-biblio profile.*

heard of you; and, by the way, we're going to need to see just who your publishers are!?)

Stuffy?

Oh, I think so…

Anyway, the money they were talking about for a week's work was quite good, so I figured I'd be willing to put up with it. But I couldn't help but throw a dart or two in this Ted's direction—just to test his mettle. I said I'd been a professional writer for 25 years, and 30 books during that span didn't seem all that unusual for anyone who was working everyday, but hey, I'd be happy to send him my credentials.

About a month later, I get a call from Ted, who tells me my bibliography[4] was "quite impressive," and that The Selection Committee would like to interview me and would it be possible to visit them at Middlebury College? I told them it would be no problem, especially since one of best friends and old college room-mate, Jay Leshinsky[5], happened to live in Middlebury, and I would be able to stop in and hang with him as well.

So I meet with Ted, who was fifty-ish, tall and wiry with Einstein hair, defined by a white shirt tucked awkwardly into sagging corduroys. He was accompanied by two other committee peeps: a woman who wore the required uniform of your standard Vermont Tree-Hugger and PETA member (Birkenstock sandals over socks, granny-style denim skirt, baggy turtleneck, long graying hair parted in the middle, horn-rimmed glasses which helped to hide the bushy eyebrows, and a distinct and obvious disdain for cosmetics), and thirdly a younger guy with longish hair, sporting one of those little goatees I find unrelentingly irritating, and wire-rimmed spectacles. He looked like he'd just rolled off the campus of Smith or Barnard in time for a quick lunch.

They asked me a lot of questions that were pretty much what I'd expected from a bunch of ivory-towered prisoners—you know the types, the ones who've avoided life on planet Earth as much as possible. All three of them apparently had copies of my vitae and were continually staring back at it like a twelve-year-old boy with the latest issue of *Hustler*.

Some of their questions:

Were all these short story publications to paying *markets?*

What about all the articles?

When did you make the conscious decision to be a genre *writer?*

Have you really made a living *writing?*

Do you think you're qualified to teach people who don't *want to write genre fiction?*

How do you feel about poetry?

There were other queries, but I think you get the tenor of the interview. They were clearly suspicious of me, but had no choice other than to respect me on some level…(even if it was the kind of respect usually reserved for the guy you see on the filler segment of the evening news who built a 1/25 scale replica of the statue of liberty in his backyard out of matchsticks). Not only did they have my prodigious published output to deal with, but I'd also wheeled them with a ton of teaching and speaking credentials—at places like Johns Hopkins, American University, University of Maryland, Dartmouth, UMass at Fitchburg, and other merry groves of academe[6]; plus a bunch of libraries, and corporations.

When the interview ended, they told me they would be in touch about being one of the writers-in-residence later that summer. I thanked them, and figured that was the last I'd hear of them.

So, I *was* surprised when I got the letter inviting me to be part of their New England Young Writers Conference. The letter went on to explain the committee believed I would be better suited to mentor college and high school seniors rather than older, more "experienced" writers because of the appeal of horror and fantasy among younger readers.

That sounded like a vaguely guarded statement, which meant: they believed I wrote stuff that would most likely appeal to an immature, not fully-developed-mind, which was fine with me—like I said, the money was great.

At that point I figured I should at least get a quick read on what Breadloaf was all about—although the impressions I'd gathered from my interrogators should have been all the barometer I'd need.

I think the first time I'd heard of the Breadloaf writers conference was an ad I saw in the back pages of *Writers Digest* magazine when I was just getting my career started in the early '70s. I don't remember what the ad said but it was artfully worded to give the impression that this was a (orient nose high in the air here…) *veddy* fancy, *veddy* exclusive, *veddy* important place for young writers to come and learn their craft.

An excerpt from their website should give you an idea of what we're talking about here:

The Bread Loaf Writers' Conference is one of America's most valuable literary institutions. For more than 75 years, the workshops, lectures, and classes, held in the shadow of the Green Mountains, have introduced generations of participants to rigorous practical and theoretical approaches to the craft of writing, and given America itself proven models of literary instruction. Bread Loaf is not a retreat—not a place to work in solitude. Instead it provides a stimulating community of diverse voices in which we test our own assumptions regarding literature and seek advice about our progress as writers.

In August we will again welcome more than two hundred talented writers to the historic Bread Loaf Inn, along with our distinguished faculty, and many agents and editors from major publishing houses and literary firms.

Come prepared to join fully in the busy schedule and to enjoy the beauty of the wilderness setting. No one who has done so has failed to be inspired, encouraged, or changed by Bread Loaf.

Wow.

Pretty impressive, huh? 75 years of "testing our assumptions regarding literature."

Wow-*wee*.

Okay, so that was dancing pretty close to *pompous*, wouldn't you agree? But wait, don't say…there's more! About three weeks before I was scheduled to arrive at the Breadloaf Inn, I received a big packet of stuff about the conference and among the papers were short bio/biblios on the other "faculty" members with whom I'd be working and presumably chumming when not working. I've removed their names for reasons which

[4] *24 novels, 100+ short stories, 80+columns and articles, 6 screenplays, 2 stage plays, translated into 14 languages.*

[5] *The sharper minds among you may notice this is the person to whom I dedicated my M.A.F.I.A. omnibus.*

[6] *I told them I often get invited to speak within the crenellated walls where Marxism still lives; what I didn't tell them is that I never get invited back. Fuck 'em. Let them find out for themselves…*

should be obvious, but here's a sampling of the crowd:

____ won the Ralph Hill Award for her story, "Hornpout," which will appear in the fall issue of Vermont Life Magazine. *She is on the faculty of the Spalding University MFA in Writing program, teaches summer writing courses at the University of Vermont, and English, journalism and creative writing at Mt. Mansfield Union High School. She is a graduate of George Washington University and holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College.*

____ graduated from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University and currently teaches literature and writing at Southampton College and Suffolk Community College, New York. His third collection of poetry, The LightHouse, *is published by Salmon Press in Ireland, which also published his two previous collections,* Kings and Bicycles *and* Columbus Rides Again.

____has had poems published throughout the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, and Japan, and he has taught writing and literature at Shanghai University and the Universidad Dos Acores. At this time, he is teaching at Champlain College in Burlington, VT – where he is the Poet-In-Residence

____ is an Associate Professor of English at Adirondack Community College, teaches courses in developmental and interdisciplinary literacy, critical theory, and literary studies. His poetry collection, Looking for the Lost, *won the Hudson Valley Writers Guild's first chapbook contest in 1996.*

____ is the author of three novels, A Handbook for Visitors from Outer Space, Rattlesnake Farming, *and* Sweet Water. *She has taught at Washington University, The Bennington Writing Seminars, and Marlboro College, among other places. She now teaches creative writing and literature at Middlebury College*

____ is a graduate of Princeton, and holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Columbia. His short stories have been published in The New Yorker, Harper's, Playboy, Zoetrope, *and anthologized in* The O. Henry Awards: Prize Stories 1996, The 1997 *and* 1998 Pushcart Prize *anthologies.*

___ began his education traveling ten thousand miles on the angle of a genetically transmitted hitchhiker's thumb. He then sailed around the world with Semester at Sea, a shipboard campus devoted to global studies. He acquired his bachelor's degree in creative writing from The Evergreen State College, and studied Elizabethan literature at Oxford University. For three years he studied and practiced Vipassana meditation, and for three years he homesteaded an otherwise deserted island in Southeast Alaska.[7]

And then there was me.

Sounded like a real party. It had me really wondering what it would be like.

Actually, it wasn't too bad for the first couple of days. The campus is on top of the mountain, and the buildings are old quasi-Victorians which have been converted into apartments/dorms. The food was NECON-style—line 'em up and dish out the hash—but proved to be extremely passable fare. Apparently the students were paying a fairly big ticket for this place, and if the chuck wagon sucked, word would get out fast. An army's not the only thing traveling on its belly; writers and snakes do a decent job of it too.

And the dorm rooms in these old Victorian houses were full of gables and angles and turrets, situated at the crest of Breadloaf Mountain. Great views, clean, crisp air, starry nights stained by the milkyway. (A little writerly phrase there...)

I was assigned a group of nine young writers who were either high school seniors or college kids, and we met each day for two hours for an entire week. They also met with two other instructors for a total of six hours a day, which proved to be a tough grind for some of them. As I worked through the week, I realized I had three types of writers in my group—

(1) two who were there because (and they admitted this to me) they didn't have anything better to do, and their wealthy parents had bugged them into signing on;

(2) five who liked to write, but also liked music and theater and painting, and were trying this workshop to see if writing was really what they wanted; and

(3) finally two feverishly driven kids who wanted to be writers so bad they were practically salivating at the prospect.

This was about the mix you can usually expect in the average group, but I naturally had more sympathy and interest in the two who were going to become professional writers or kill themselves from the effort. The first two sessions were a little awkward because none of us knew each other, the kids didn't know how to take my casual, informal approach, and they had a tough time dealing with some of the rarified and theoretical flummery they were getting from their *other* instructors when they compared it to my in-the-trenches shards of advice (and other lessons learned living off the words I write).

But eventually, we all learned to relax around each other, and things started to make sense to them. I started off by reinforcing the basic elements[8] of storytelling, and how to *analyze* a given piece of prose for the presence, or lack, of those elements. Once they could recognize the difference between an engaging character and a faceless stiff, concise dialogue from rambling speechification, or an organically structured plot from silly coincidence, they were able to discuss these things intelligently, and implement the concepts in their own stories.

I also tried to teach them something I learned early on in the writing game—the value of a sense of humor, and the ability to take your writing seriously without taking *yourself* in like manner. Being able to laugh at your mistakes and continue onward helps more writers than all the grammar and usage texts you could ever read. And I made sure they didn't confuse that advice with the ability to be a tough self-editor. Sure, they should learn to smile when they caught egregious errors in their work; but they needed the objectivity to catch them and correct them in the first place.

The secret was not feeling bad about it later. I also told them to never forget their primary objective as writers: *be entertaining.* Whatever else followed was gravy—enrichment, inspiration, erudition, fame, money, movie deals, etc.

[7] *This last guy, other than sounding like The Wandering and Eternal Hippie, apparently hadn't published anything... ("angle of a genetically transmitted thumb?" Give me a fucking break.)*

[8] *No space to get into that here...you can find an illuminating and wonderfully thorough detailing of these elements in my book,* The Complete Idiot's Guide to Writing a Novel. *Go to* www.borderlandspress.com *and order a signed copy.*

Most of the group interacted well with me. One girl (one of the two dilettantes), started tuning me out because I could have just as easily been giving a lecture on disease transmission vectors among *Dichondra micrantha.* And one of the guys in the middle group never caught my sense of humor, and felt I wasn't treating the entire writing endeavor with proper respect.[9]

I have a hard time dealing with humorless types. He was no exception.

So, the days roll on, and my group gets better and better and by the end of the week, I don't even need to moderate the roundtable critiques. They're doing it on their own, and they are doing a good job of getting to the meaty parts with skill and efficiency. I smile. I've done my job.

The week's events finally wrap up with a good-bye barbecue on Sunday evening which is followed by a big read-fest, in which all the faculty gets to read to the assembled attendees. We gather in a summer barn-theatre and there are several hundred in the seats. We all are supposed to get 20 minutes to read, and everyone complies except a woman who does a kind of weird puppet show with costume changes and accents, and lots of that performance-art crapola that is big with poseur-set, but doesn't exactly excite more well-grounded creative types. Her bit is long and shot through with a multiculturalist tract of the type that usually inspires me to projectile vomiting. The usual anti-assimilation celebration I see at our colleges more and more.

Time glaciates past us while this woman proselytizes under the cloak of entertainment, and I am getting tired of it. When it comes my turn to read, I decided to keep it short, so I read them my column about the time I met Ted Sturgeon for the first time, and how it was odd to discover he wasn't at all like I'd imagined he would be.[10] It was met with a reaction I should rightly call "mixed." About half the crowd laughed in all the right places, and the other half regarded me with faces of stone.[11]

To tell you the truth, I was ready to go home, and I really didn't care.

Later that evening, they had a big bonfire and some broke out wine and beer and cocktails, and we all wound down the long week with some final thoughts and observations. A couple of my co-mentors collared me to tell me they enjoyed my reading, while several others told me they weren't sure it was appropriate material for young people. One guy told me he thought it was only tangentially associated with writing, and I smiled graciously as I told him that was okay, because, well hey!, that's pretty much the same way I felt about his poetry and his genetically-engineered thumb (remember him?).

He walked away quickly.

The guy from Princeton who had a habit of winning Pushcart Awards told me something that's stuck with me, and has in some elemental way colored my perception forever after of academic conferences such as Breadloaf. I liked him. He'd been a very regular guy, and we were speaking honestly and with plenty of bonhomie. He said "You know, I'm not sure the people who run this place like you very much."

I smiled. "I hope not," I said. "But I'm curious. Why not?"

"You're too..."

[At this point I expected his next word to be something like "outspoken," or "informal," or even "arrogant," but he said:]

"Successful."

"What?" I said, caught uncharacteristically off-balance.

"Yeah, " he said. "You don't fit the mold they like to see...you know, the struggling artist, misunderstood, unappreciated, underpaid, being forced to work menial jobs to stay alive. I think the academics *hate* to see people actually making a living at being creative."

And you know what? I think he's right.

The folks who run these kind of conferences have this weird need to keep things mystifying and somehow beyond the ken of the masses. They're like the high priests in the cheesy movies who run the barbarian-planet cultures, who live under a mantel of constant fear their followers will find out they're a bunch of charlatans. When somebody comes into their midst and tells the attendees the truth about writing getting published.... boy, does that piss them off.

And that, I think, is the point of all this. If you have sought out formal or academic training in literature or writing, don't dismiss it, but accept in the proper spirit of healthy skepticism and flavor it strongly with the seasonings of your own experience. Workshops can be a lot of fun and they can be challenging and inspirational. Just don't let the phonies phlummox you.

Now, having said that, I guess the only question left to answer is whether or not I ever got invited back to Breadloaf?

(enter here the sound of wry laughter)

Later.

Shameless Hype and Promotion

In addition to the usual MAFIA omnibus and *Complete Idiot's Guide*, my collection *Fearful Symmetries* is finally available from Cemetery Dance. Available now or soon are the following: my contribution to Borderlands' "little book" series (*A Little Brown Book of Bizarre Stories*), a novelette in *Taverns of the Dead*, a novella in *The Brimstone Turnpike*, a story in Picirrilli's *Midnight Premiere*, and of course the bestselling Warner paperback edition of *Borderlands 5* (entitled *From the Borderlands*). Yeah I've been busy. Now go buy it all, and read it.

One final note: your comments, observations, suggestions, etc. are always welcome at PO Box 97, Fork, MD 21051; or tfm@borderlandspress.com.

[9] *I get that once in a while. Most recently with a few numb-nut reviews on Amazon.com re the aforementioned* Idiot's Guide. *They said I was too casual, too informal, and even misunderstood my tone to be "arrogant." And I thought I was being nice... Besides, if they want arrogant, they gotta come here.*

[10] *It was entitled "On Discovering Your Idols Have Balls of Clay," and chronicles my discovery that Sturgeon was a practicing nudist in his final years...*

[11] *Fuck them.*

Watermelon

Scott Nicholson

Scott Nicholson is the author of *The Manor*, *The Harvest*, and *The Red Church*, with *The Home* scheduled for release in Aug. 2005. After several hundred rejections, he finally sold a novel, so naturally he took up screenwriting so a whole new class of strangers could tell him "No." That doesn't stop him from offering dubious writing advice at www.hauntedcomputer.com.

Ricky bought the watermelon on a warm Saturday afternoon in September.

The early crop had arrived at the local grocer's in late June, fresh from California, but the available specimens were hard and heartless. Ricky had decided to wait for a Deep South watermelon, and those traditionally arrived many weeks after the annual Fourth of July slaughter. Besides, that was early summer. At that point he had yet to read about the murder and his home life with Maybelle was in a state of uneasy truce.

But now it was the last day of summer, a definite end of something and the beginning of something else. The watermelon was beautiful. It was perfectly symmetrical, robust, its green stripes running in tigerlike rhythms along the curving sides. A little bit of vine curled from one end like the cute tail of a pig. He tapped it and elicited a meaty, liquid thump.

It was heavy, maybe ten pounds, and Ricky brought it from the bin as carefully as if it were an infant. His wife had given him a neatly-penned list of thirteen items, most of them for her personal use. But his arms were full, and he didn't care to trudge through the health and beauty section, and he had no appetite for Hostess cupcakes and frozen waffles. Sheryl Crowe was singing a bright ditty of sun and optimism over the loudspeakers, music designed to lobotomize potential consumers. Ricky made a straight path to the checkout counter and placed the watermelon gently on the conveyor belt.

Now that his hands were free, he could pick up one of the regional dailies. The front page confined the woman's picture to a small square on the left. Her killer, the man who had sworn to love and honor until death did them part, merited a feature photograph three columns wide, obviously the star of the show and the most interesting part of the story.

"That's sickening, isn't it?" came a voice behind him.

Ricky laid the newspaper on the belt so the cashier could ring it up. He turned to the person who had spoken, a short man with sad eyes and a sparse mustache, a man who had never considered violence of any kind toward his own wife.

"They say he was perfectly normal," Ricky said. He wasn't the kind for small talk with strangers, but the topic interested him. "The kind of man who coached Little League and attended church regularly. The kind the neighbors said they never would have suspected."

"A creep is what he is. I hope they fry him and send him to hell to fry some more."

"North Carolina uses lethal injection."

"Fry him anyway."

"I wonder what she was like." Since the murder last week, Ricky had been studying the woman's photograph, trying to divine the character traits that had driven a man to murder. Had she been unfailingly kind and considerate, and had thus driven her husband into a blinding red madness?

"A saint," the short man said. "She volunteered at the animal shelter."

"That's what I heard," Ricky said. The cashier told him the total and he thumbed a credit card from his wallet. People always took kindness toward animals as a sign of divine benevolence. Let children starve in Africa but don't kick a dog in the ribs. For all this man knew, she volunteered because she liked to help with the euthanizing.

"At least they caught the bastard," the man said.

"He turned himself in." Obviously the man had been settling for the six-o'clock-news sound bites instead of digging into the real story. Murder was rare here, and a sordid case drew a lot of attention. But most of the people Ricky talked with about the murder had only a passing knowledge of the facts and seemed quite content in their ignorance and casual condemnation.

Ricky took the watermelon to the car, rolled it into the passenger seat, and sat behind the wheel reading the paper. The first days of coverage had focused on quotes from neighbors and relatives and terse statements by the detectives, but now the shock had worn off. In true small-town fashion, the police had not allowed any crime scene photos, and the early art had consisted of somber police officers standing around strips of yellow tape. A mug shot of the husband had been taken from public record files, showing mussed hair, stubble, and the eyes of a trapped animal. The District Attorney had no doubt kept him up all night for a long round of questioning, to ensure that the arrest photo would show the perpetrator in the worst possible light. No matter how carefully the jurors were selected, that first impression often lingered in the minds of those who would pass judgment.

A week later, the coverage had made the easy shift into back story, digging into the couple's history, finding cracks in the marriage. The only way to keep the story on the front page was for reporters to turn up personal tidbits, make suggestions about affairs and insurance, and build a psychological profile for a man who was so perfectly average that only hindsight revealed the slightest flaw.

Ricky drove home with the images playing in his mind, a reel of fantasy film he'd painted from the police reports. The husband comes home, finds dinner on the table as always, green peas and potatoes, thinly sliced roast beef with gravy, a cheesecake that the wife must have spent hours making. They eat, watch an episode of *Law & Order*, then she takes a shower and goes to bed. Somewhere between the hours on either side

of midnight, the husband makes his nightly trek to share the warmth and comfort of the marital bed. Only, this time, he carries with him a seven-inch companion of sharp, stainless steel.

Seventeen times, according to the medical examiner. One of the rookie reporters had tried to develop a numerology angle and assign a mystical significance to the number of stab wounds, but police suspected the man had simply lost count during the frenzy of blood lust. The first blow must have done the trick, and if the man had only meant to solve a problem, that surely would have sufficed. But he was in search of something, an experience that could only be found amid the silver thrusts, the squeaking of bedsprings, the soft moans, and the wet dripping of a final passion.

By the time Ricky pulled into his driveway, he was moist with sweat. He found himself comparing his and Maybelle's house with that of the murderer's, as shown in the Day Two coverage. The murderer's house was in the next county, but it would have been right at home in Ricky's neighborhood. Two stories, white Colonial style, a stable line of shrubbery surrounding the porch. Shutters framing windows framing curtains that hid the lives inside. Both houses were ordinary, upper middle class, with no discernible differences except that one had harbored an extraordinary secret that festered and then exploded.

Ricky fanned his face dry with the newspaper, then slipped it under the seat. He wrestled the watermelon out and carried it up the front steps. He could have driven into the garage, but his car had leaked a few drops of oil and Maybelle had complained. He nearly dropped the watermelon as he reached to open the door. He pictured it lying burst open on the porch, its shattered skin and pink meat glistening in the afternoon sun.

But he managed to prop it against his knee and turn the handle, then push his way inside.

Her voice came from the living room. "Ricky?"

"Who else?" he said in a whisper. As if a random attacker would walk through the door, as if her ordered life was capable of attracting an invader. As if she deserved any type of victimhood.

"What's that, honey?"

He raised his voice. "Yes, dear. It's me."

"Did you get everything? You know how forgetful you are."

Which is why she gave him the lists. But even with a list, he had a habit of always forgetting at least one item. She said it was a deliberate act of passive aggression, that nobody could be that forgetful. But he was convinced it was an unconscious lapse, because he did it even when he wrote out the list himself.

"I had to—" He didn't know what to tell her. A lie came to mind, some elaborate story of helping someone change a flat tire beside the road, and how the person had given him a watermelon in gratitude, and Ricky wanted to put the watermelon in the refrigerator before shopping. But Maybelle would see through the story. He wondered if the murdering husband had told such white lies.

"I had to come back and take my medicine," he said, heading down the hall to the kitchen. "You know how I get."

Maybelle must have been sitting in her chair, the one that dominated the living room and was within reach of the bookcase, the telephone, and the remote control. Her perfect world. White walls. Knick-knacks neatly dusted, potted plants that never dared shed so much as a leaf. Photographs of her relatives lining the walls, but not a single member of Ricky's family.

"You and your medicine," she said. "You were gone an hour."

He pretended he hadn't heard her. He put the watermelon on the counter and opened the refrigerator. He thought of hiding it in one of the large bottom bins but he wasn't sure it would fit. Besides, this was his refrigerator, too. He'd paid for it, even though Maybelle's snack foods took up the top two shelves. In a moment of rebellion, he shoved some of his odd condiments aside, the horseradish, brown mustard, and marinade sauces that occupied the bottom shelf. He slid the watermelon into place, though its girth caused the wire rack above it to tilt slightly and tumble a few Tupperware containers. He slammed the refrigerator closed with an air of satisfaction.

He turned and there was Maybelle, filling the entryway that divided the kitchen and dining room. Her arms were folded across her chest, wearing the serene smile of one who held an even temper in the face of endless trials. Ricky found himself wondering if the murdered wife had possessed such stolid and insufferable equanimity.

"What was that?" Maybelle asked.

Ricky backed against the refrigerator. There was really no reason to lie, and, besides, it's not like she wouldn't notice the first time she went rummaging for a yogurt. But, for one hot and blind moment, he resented her ownership of the refrigerator. Why couldn't he have a watermelon if he wanted?

"A watermelon," he said.

"A watermelon? Why didn't you get one back in the middle of summer, like everybody else?"

He couldn't explain. If she had been in the grocery store with him, she'd have been impressed by the watermelon's vibrancy and vitality. Even though the melon was no longer connected to its roots, it was earthy and ripe, a perfectly natural symbol for the last day of summer. But he was afraid if he opened the door, it would just be an ovate mass of dying fruit.

"I liked this one," he said.

"Where are my things?"

"I—" He looked at the floor, at the beige ceramic tiles whose seams of grout were spotless.

"You forgot. On purpose. Just like always."

"I'm sorry," he said, and suddenly his throat was dry and tight, and he thought of the husband and how he must have slid open the cutlery drawer and selected something that could speak for him when words were worthless.

"Of course, you're sorry. You've always been sorry. But that never changes anything, does it?"

"My medicine—"

"Have a seat in the living room, and I'll bring it to you."

He went and sat on the sofa, afraid to muss the throw pillows. The early local news came on the television. A fire on the other side of the county had left a family homeless. Then came the obligatory follow-up on the murder.

"Investigators say they may have uncovered a motive in last week's brutal slaying—"

Click. He looked away from the screen and Maybelle stood there, the remote raised. "Evil, evil, evil," she said. "That nasty man. I just don't know what goes through people's minds, do you?"

Ricky wondered. Maybe the husband had a wife who controlled the television, the radio, the refrigerator, the garage, and wrote large charity checks to the animal shelter. Maybelle gave him his pills and a glass of water. He swallowed, grateful.

"I read that he was an accountant," Ricky said. "Just like me."

"Takes all kinds. The poor woman, you've got to feel sorry for her. Closes her eyes to go to sleep and the next thing you know, the man she trusted and loved with all her heart—"

"—is standing over her, the lights are off but the knife flashes just the same, he's holding the handle so tight that his hand is aching, except he can't feel it, it's like he's got electricity running through his body, he's on fire and he's never felt so powerful, and—"

Maybelle's laughter interrupted him. "It's not a movie, Ricky. A wife-killing slasher isn't any more special than a thief who shoots a stranger for ten bucks. When it comes down to it, they're all low-down dirty dogs who ought to be locked up before they hurt somebody else."

"Everybody feels sorry for her," Ricky said. "But what about the husband? Don't you think he probably feels sick inside? She's gone, but he's left to live with the knowledge of what he's done."

"Not for long. I hear the D.A. is going after the death penalty. She's up for re-election next year and has been real strong on domestic violence."

"He'll probably plead temporary insanity."

"Big surprise," Maybelle said. "Only a crazy man would kill his wife."

"I don't know. With a good lawyer—"

"They're always making excuses. He'll say his wife made him wear a dress when no one was looking. That he had to lick her high heels. That she was carrying on with the pet store supplier. It's always the woman's fault. It makes me sick."

Ricky looked at the carpet. The stains must have been tremendous, geysers of blood spraying in different directions, painting the walls, seeping into the sheets and shag, soiling the delicate undergarments that the wife no doubt wore to entice her husband into chronic frustration.

"Ricky?"

Her voice brought him back from the last reel of his fantasy film and into the living room.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better," he said, lying only a little.

"Ready to go back to the grocery store?"

"Yes."

"And not forget anything this time?

He nodded.

After shopping, getting all the items on the list, he sat in the grocery store parking lot and re-read all the newspapers hidden beneath the seat. He looked at the mug shot and visualized his own face against the grayish background with the black lines. He pored over the details he already knew by heart, then imagined the parts not fleshed out in the news accounts: the trip up the stairs in the silent house, a man with a mission, no thought of the act itself or the aftermath. One step, one stroke at a time. The man had chosen a knife from the kitchen drawer instead of buying one especially for the job. It had clearly been a crime of passion, and passion had been missing from Ricky's life for many years.

He looked at the paper that held the wife's picture. He tried to juxtapose the picture with Maybelle's. He failed. He realized he couldn't summon his own wife's face.

He drove home and was in the kitchen putting the things away when Maybelle entered the room.

"You've stacked my cottage cheese three high," she said. "You know I only like it with two. I can't check the date otherwise."

"There's no room," he said.

"Take out that stupid watermelon."

"But I like them when they're cold."

"Put it in the bathtub or something."

He squeezed the can of mushroom soup he was holding, wishing he were strong enough to make the metal seams rip and the cream spurt across the room.

"I put dinner on the table," she said. "Roast beef and potatoes."

"Green peas?"

"No, broccoli."

"I wanted green peas."

"How was I to know? You'll eat what I served or you can cook your own food."

"I guess you didn't make a cheesecake."

"There's ice cream in the freezer." She laughed. "Or you can eat your watermelon."

He went to the dinner table. Maybelle had already eaten, put away her place mat, and polished her end of the table. Ricky sat and worked the potatoes, then held the steak knife and studied its serrated edge. He sawed it across the beef and watched the gray grains writhe beneath the metal.

Maybelle entered the dining room. "How's your food?"

"Yummy."

"Am I not a good wife?"

He made an appreciative mumble around a mouthful of food.

"I'm going upstairs," she said. "I'm going to have a nice, long bath and then put on something silly and slinky."

Ricky nodded.

"I'll be in bed, waiting. And, who knows, you might get lucky." She smiled. She'd already brushed her teeth. Her face was perfectly symmetrical, pleasing, her eyes soft and gentle. He felt a stirring inside him. How could he ever forget her face? Ricky compared her to the murdered wife and wondered which of them was prettiest. Which of them would the press anoint as having suffered a greater tragedy?

"I'll be up in a bit," he said. "I want to do a little reading."

"Just don't wait too long. I'm sleepy."

"Yes, dear."

When he was alone, he spat the half-chewed mouthful of food onto his plate. He carried the plate to the kitchen and scraped the remains into the garbage disposal. He wondered if the husband had thought of trying to hide the body, or if he had been as surprised by his actions as she must have been.

The watermelon was on the counter. Maybelle had taken it from the refrigerator.

He went to the utensil drawer and slid it open. He and Maybelle had no children, and safety wasn't a concern. The knives lay in a bright row, arranged according to length. How had the husband made his decision? Size? Sharpness? Or the balance of the handle?

If he had initially intended to make only one thrust, he probably would have gone for depth. If he had aspired to make art, then a number of factors came into play. Ricky's head hurt, his throat a wooden knot. He grabbed the knife that most resembled the murder weapon shown in the press photographs.

Ricky turned the lights low, then carried the knife to the counter. He pressed the blade to the watermelon and found that the blade trembled in his hand. The watermelon grew soft and blurred in his vision, and he realized he was weeping. How could anyone ever destroy a thing of such beauty?

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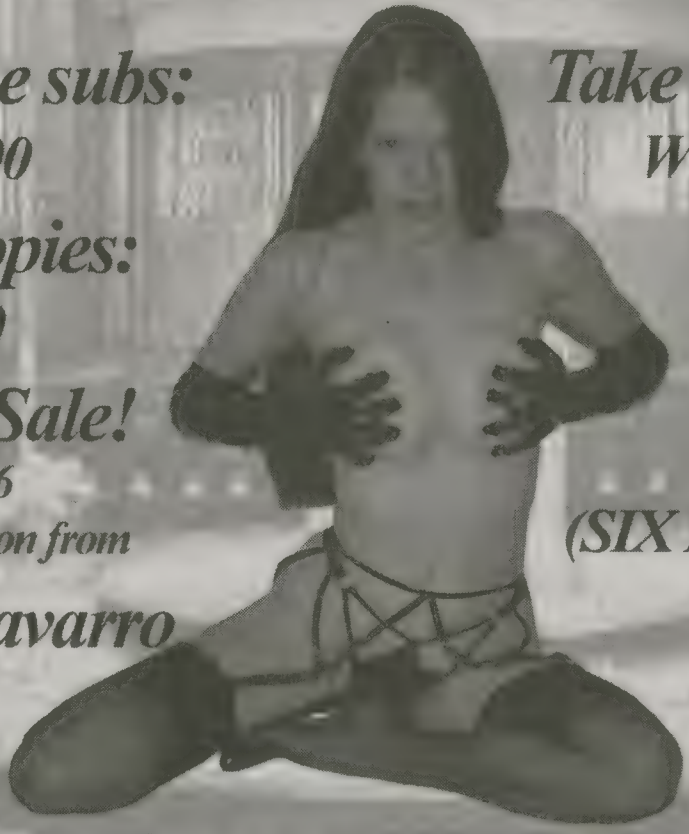

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He forced himself to press the knife against the cool green rind. The flesh parted but Ricky eased up as a single drop of clear dew swelled from the wound. The husband hadn't hesitated, he'd raised the knife and plunged, but once hadn't been enough, neither had twice, three times, but over and over, a rhythm, passion, passion, passion.

He dropped the knife and the tip broke as it clattered across the tiles. The watermelon sat whole and smooth on the counter. Tears tickled his cheeks. Maybelle was upstairs in the dark bed, his pillows were stacked so he wouldn't snore, the familiar cupped and rounded area of the mattress was waiting for him.

The husband had been a crazy fool, that was all. He'd cut his wife to bits, no rhyme or reason. She hadn't asked for any of it. She was a victim of another person's unvoiced and unfulfilled desires, just like Maybelle.

Ricky spun and thrust his fist down into the melon, squeezed the red wetness of its heart. He ripped the rind open and the air grew sweet. He pulled at the pink insides, clawed as if digging for some deeply buried secret. He was sobbing, and the pulp spattered onto his face as he plunged his hands into the melon again and again.

A voice pulled him from the red sea of rage in which he was drowning.

Maybelle. Calling from upstairs.

"Ricky?"

He held his breath, his pulse throbbing so hard he could feel it in his neck. He looked down at the counter, at the mess in the kitchen, at the pink juice trickling to the floor.

"Ricky?" she called again. He looked toward the hall, but she was still upstairs. So she hadn't heard.

He looked at his sticky hands.

"Are you coming to bed?"

He looked at the knife on the floor. His stomach was as tight as a melon. He gulped for some air, tasted the mist of sugar. "Yes, dear."

She said no more, and must have returned to bed in her silly and slinky things. The room would be dark and she would be waiting.

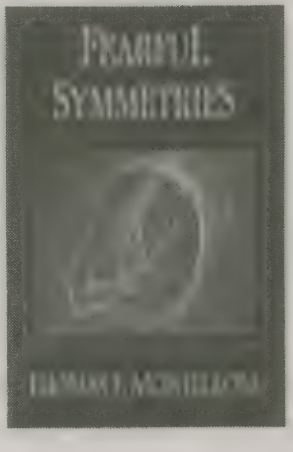
Ricky collected the larger scraps of the watermelon and fed them into the garbage disposal. He swept the floor and scooped up the remaining shreds, then wiped the counter. He wrung out a dish cloth and got on his hands and knees, scrubbing the tiles and then the grout.

The husband had harbored no secrets. A pathetic man who made another person pay for his shortcomings. He was a sick, stupid animal. Ricky would think no more of him, and tomorrow he would throw the newspapers away.

He washed his hands in the sink, put the knife away, and gave the kitchen a cursory examination. No sign of the watermelon remained, and his eyes were dry, and his hands no longer trembled.

Tomorrow, summer would be over. It was the end of something, and the beginning of something else. Maybelle was waiting, and he might get lucky. Ricky went to the stairs and took them one step at a time, up into darkness.

MONTELEONE



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PAULA GURAN

WAVES OF FEAR

I'M NOT SURE WHO first compared horror to food. I'm not even sure the comparison was originally about horror. Proper attribution aside, it goes something like this: Horror accommodates your appetite. Sometimes you want fast food—lacking in nutrition, overly caloric, but quick, enjoyable, and reliably forgettable. Sometimes you want haute cuisine and fine wine. Then there's good old home-style comfort food; spicy exotic fare; beer and pretzels; meals that may be a little hard to digest at first, but that eventually prove to be unforgettable—you get the idea.

(Come to think of it, sex would be a better analogy, but we don't want to upset Robert and Rich. We'll stick to food.)

The point is, of course, that there's a rich variety of dark literature available. One person may be an aficionado of one dish and not another, one's tastes may change, one may indulge in one menu one day and another the next, et cetera—no matter the flavor of the fare there are fine examples to nosh on.

At one point in history a great many books that were called horror were being published. The variety was there—from champagne to swill—but most of them were of the cheeseburger variety. Some of them were really tasty, but most of them weren't so good. Eat a few really bad cheeseburgers and you'll start avoiding them altogether. When cheeseburgers stop selling, the chefs cut the menus. Lobster, pizza, fois gras, peanut butter sandwiches—it all goes away with the cheeseburgers.

Nowadays, the horror menu is pretty full. Sometimes you need a road map to find the best new restaurant, sometimes our favorite food might be in short supply, but we usually have plenty to choose from.

The problem is that everyone wants to be considered four-star fare. No one wants to be told their filet of fear is burnt or their *terrine de terreur* is inedible, or even that their scary stew needs a little more spice. This is understandable. Chefs (writers) put many hours and much effort into creating their cuisine—or at least considerable sweat flipping it on the grill—and they want everyone to chow down and ask for seconds.

But that's not a reasonable way to do business. You customers (readers)

who pay for and consume the food (writing) deserve to have some sort of idea of what you are investing your time and money in. You are not always going to be satisfied. There's always going to be some room for debate or just plain old disagreement because tastes do vary, but that's no reason to abandon justifiable warnings. Reviews should be a consumers' guide to horror, not merely praise of everything dished out.

Yet that's pretty much what most people who cook up horror seem to want. It's understandable: no one wants to be told their creation is less than scrumptious; it tastes fine to them—or maybe they know the dish is not perfectly appetizing, but they don't want some stranger telling them that. But food is also merchandise. Beyond being a commodity and, therefore, judgeable, most writers think their victuals should be in contests. They enter their canned goods and pies in a competition and their pals all tell them the foodstuffs are fab. If the contest is won by a popular vote, then their chow may still win; but if the winner is determined by some other means, chances are the inferior fare won't stand a chance.

† † †

Let's drop the analogy before we all get the munchies and eat our magazines.

The point is that there is very little serious reviewing these days in horror. There's also next to no real criticism (as in "considered judgment of or discus-

sion about the qualities of something, especially a creative work") or criticism (as in "opinions that point out one or more faults of a work") outside of some academic critique.

Part of the problem is probably historical and possibly integral. Horror, as a genre, doesn't have the same sort of long-established fan base that its sister science fiction has. There's a tradition of debate, discussion, and criticism in SF that has never existed and never will exist for horror. What did exist for horror along these lines never really thrived. This may be because few people really want to read *about* horror. Stefan Dziemianowicz, who has done some serious horror criticism, once pointed out to me that readers tend to read horror for pleasure or entertainment while science fiction is all about, well, speculating. It's still entertaining, but in a more thoughtful way. Horror is, as we know because Doug Winter told us, an emotion. We feel it. We don't *think* about it.

Alan Beatts of Borderlands Books theorizes that the science fiction readers tend to self-identify as "science fiction readers" whereas horror readers do not tend to identify with their reading and are more often casual readers. An sf reader will frequently read only sf; the horror reader reads much more widely. Nor do horror readers seem to feel any particular bond with other people based on what they read. Thus it seems horror readers are no more of a cohesive identifiable group than fiction readers in general, whereas sf readers can be seen as a definite group unified by their interest in all things science fictional, not only by their reading. (I'm abbreviating the theory, but this is my column, not Alan's.)

That concept, too, supports the idea that folks really don't care to cerebrate about horror so much as read it. There's a good possibility that there are just enough people interested to really support serious criticism of modern horror.

There's another semi-historical aspect, too, that applies more to reviewing than criticism. By the time I started hanging out with horror about ten years ago, there seemed to be a lot of people who reviewed horror in its small press who wrote negatively without providing back-up reasoning or example. Some were ignorant or at least did not know how to express themselves well. Some thought that part of their job was to find something wrong with anything they read. Some just liked being snarky because they thought that made them appear to be clever. Some may have taken potshots for personal reasons. I'm not sure exactly why, but it seems like there was, shall we say, a bit of a nasty atmosphere.

There was some reason, in other words, for a writer to feel defensive about a "bad review" because some times the review or the reviewer was NOT fair.

I think that's mostly disappeared now. Unfortunately one reason is that there are fewer venues that review horror. Perhaps just as unfortunate, though, is that the "support the genre" clarion was used to drown the negativity out. I played that tune myself for a while—until I realized that no one should support anything not worth supporting; that "support the genre" could mean, all too often, "support anything connected with the genre whether it is good or bad or otherwise."

Still, bad reasons or not, that sort of reviewing, for the most part, has disappeared. What is left, however, is more pleasant but not any more acceptable. The trend now seems to be to never meet a book you don't like, to over-praise, and to be blind to even obvious flaws.

I suspect some of this may be because so many people who review are trying to advance their "careers" as fiction writers. The technical term here is "suck up" as in, "If I suck up to other writers then I will have a larger pool of people who might suck up to me and my work. If I suck up to established writers they might recognize me and the connection might help me out." The technique has been known to work, so I guess you can't expect people not to try it.

Another aspect, one I think I fell into at first, is the "fanboy" (or "fangirl") mode. This is, at least, sincere. The reviewer genuinely loves horror literature as a whole and is simply too willing to be forgiving. Time and experience usually take care of fanboyism for most folks, but not all. Plus, there are always new fanboys rising.

When I started reviewing for the original *DarkEcho* (a weekly email newsletter for horror writers and others I did for over six years) and elsewhere I had a policy of "positive reviews." I reviewed only what I found worthwhile. After all, there is only so much space and time. Why waste it on the less-than-praiseworthy? So, I ignored the less-than-good and, naturally, because there simply wasn't enough time to read *everything*, some good stuff got ignored as well. This worked out in a practical manner, too. Writers and publishers couldn't be sure if they were ignored due to quality or my inundation in quantity. I think it was a social nicety we were all aware of and appreciated. (There's another few categories, too: good stuff that I read, would have liked to review, but did not have the time to write a review and/or a place to publish it; good stuff that had received enough notice elsewhere that my meager words would not have mattered; good stuff I discovered too late to do anything about; and good stuff I never saw, for example.)

Eventually—maybe this happens to anyone who is putting forth opinion on a regular basis, I don't know—this stopped working so well. There were people who decided it was my "duty" to do this or that with *DarkEcho*. Despite the fact no one paid for a subscription, that I did not get paid, and that, in fact, it cost me money to provide *DE*, these folks got some misguided notion that I *had* to do what *they* thought I should do "for the good of the genre."

There were also people who got insulted because I politely ignored them. *Why* they were ignored really didn't matter. They, too, felt I was somehow cosmically required to do their bidding and weren't, I guess, interested in mutual social niceness.

† † †

I still mostly do the positive thing, though. Occasionally I give a mixed review. Last year I did a single "Why did this book waste wood pulp?" review. For publications I review for but do not attach my name to the review, I make the call as I see fit *within the publication's editorial context* as long as I do so in a professional manner by supporting my opinion and with the bounds of word limit—and that goes for being extremely enthusiastic, too.

Why am I occupying my column space with all of this instead of just reviewing some books? I am beginning to believe all of this happy smiling horror reviewing is beginning to do some damage.

It's not serving you, the reader, well because all you see are reviews telling

you practically every book published is worth your time and money.

It's skewing the curve, so to speak, because if every book being reviewed is getting an "A," then it doesn't take much logic to figure out a large percentage of the As aren't really As. This devalues the "grade" for the top books as well as allowing the bottom of the heap an underserved passing grade.

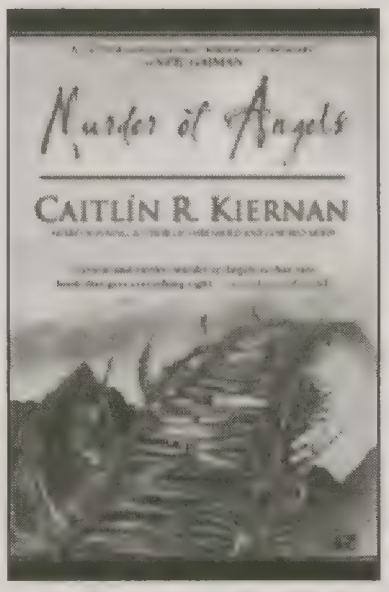
Plus, in a choir of "all is great" voices, the single voice of "it is not all great" sticks out unfairly. The truth may be the choir is singing in unison, but is on the wrong note while the solo voice is the only one singing the right note. The truth may be otherwise, but who can judge?

Most of all, it is a disservice to the writers.

Out of about three dozen book reviews in a recent *Cemetery Dance*, 28 were of small press books and five were mass-market paperbacks. (And yes, of them all, only one was negative and one was a bit mixed. Maybe every one of them was good, but I somehow doubt it.) Most of those books may be reviewed in other venues on the happy smiling horror review circuit, but few will be reviewed outside it. (Generally, small press and mass-market paperbacks simply are not reviewed as often as books from major publishers. Hardcovers and trade softcovers are reviewed in preference to mass market. Generally, horror is not a high review priority.)

Of those books, a sizeable number will have received very little, if any, editing. Newer writers of horror are often published over and over by specialty presses that provide no editing at all. There are a few specialty presses that edit, but many don't—especially the ones publishing new writers. These writers are published with no criticism, no analysis, no chance for a more experienced, more professional view to be expressed; no assistance in bettering their work or polishing their talent.

Let me give you an example of a newer writer whose work is currently being highly praised. Given her/his work from a small press to read, I went into it rooting for the writer. I'd heard good things and new talent is always welcomed. Halfway through the material I had a fairly good impression, but then the story started to fall apart. I had questions—a lot of questions—the type of questions any editor would ask the writer. Some of the points probably



could have been justified and others improved or smoothed out. There were several questions that, I suspect, the author might have been grateful to have been asked by an editor.

I could not review the work and offer *only* praise, yet I felt that if I offered a review with constructive criticism I would be the only reviewer who did not glorify the work. I also felt the writer probably didn't want anything other than a "good review"—s/he is a child of the times. Anything less than happy-smiley, given the current atmosphere in the world o' horror, might be misinterpreted. Gosh, I might even be pilloried for not "supporting the genre!" So I declined to review.

What's so terrible about that? I have this nagging feeling that this writer is never going to have anyone honestly critique her/him. Despite having stellar "blurbs" and growing list of published works, I'm fairly sure this writer hasn't had much real feedback. S/he *does* have potential, but is not yet ready for prime time. (Is this just me? No, my impression has since been reinforced by others who have read the young writer.)

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe receiving nothing but accolades won't stand in the writer's way. Maybe the writer will go on and enjoy a professional writing career. Maybe all those old saws about how you learn from your mistakes, about needing outside opinion to really progress in your craft are no longer true.

But, all in all, I think writers are suffering from this miasma of bliss and readers deserve better service than is being so cheerfully given.

t t t

So, what *can* I be happy-smiley about?

Murder of Angels
Caitlin R. Kiernan
Roc, 2004; 352 pgs.; $14

Although a sequel to debut novel, *Silk* (1998), *Murder of Angels* stands well enough on its own to attract readers unacquainted with the first. Unlike *Silk*, in which Kiernan kept a suspenseful balance between the psychological and the supernatural, *MoA* is overtly fantastic. Set ten years after the earlier novel's end, Daria Parker is now a successful, if not happy, alcoholic musician. Her lover, Niki Ky has not fared well at all. She's what a gothic novelist would call "mad," but today we term "schizophrenic." She's still as trapped as a madwoman in a gothic mansion's tower, though, confined by both medication and her mental state, and watched by a hired caregiver, Marvin. (One of Kiernan's most mundane—and level-headed—characters to date, but one of her best.) Niki is beset by dreams and visions in which her ex-lover, Spyder Baxter, who Daria and Niki found hanged at the end of *Silk*, speaks to her from beyond the grave. Spyder convinces Niki she is needed in a strange cosmic war in which Spyder plays a role. Niki's journey to destiny begins with a leap from San Francisco's Bay Bridge. Dead in this world, Niki enters a strange sinister otherworld in which she is "the Hierophant," a keeper of sacred mysteries. It is a role Spyder, now known as "the Weaver," wants her to fulfill in order to combat an entity known as "the Dragon." Daria, also haunted by voices and visions along with her guilt and grief, is left in our world seeking a magic philter—actually a ball bearing—Niki needs in the other world. Meanwhile, there's a truly weird trio on their way back to Birmingham where, in Spyder's house on Cullom Street this really all began: Archer Day, a woman who worships forgotten gods; Walter Ayers, a dead man who knows something about the end of the world; an Theda, a little goth chick who should never have called on powers beyond her understanding, but since she did, kinda gets off on her rilly freaky new role. If this is sounding a little like an RPG to

you, that's not exactly wrong, but it's also far from right. Kiernan is devising something of an anti-fantasy—or perhaps a mythic anti-hero journey—with *MoA*. We're reminded early on: "When our myths fail us...or when we are never given myths to start with...we're forced to invent them.... It can be very dangerous creating myths." Scarborough Pentecost (a character first encountered in *Low Red Moon)* tells Niki late in the game, "This thing is complicated. We aren't playing Dungeons and Dragons here. This isn't hobbits versus Sauron. If there's good and evil, black and white, it's just as hard to see here as it is back home." Second novel *Threshold* remains Kiernan's multi-layered masterwork to date, but *Murder of Angels* adds a heretofore missing cosmology and further depth to the now rapidly expanding Kiernanian universe while displaying pronounced authorial confidence. *Murder of Angels* crowns Caitlin Kiernan as the undisputed Queen of the Weird.

The Dry Salvages
Caitlin Kiernan
Subterranean Press, 2004; 130 pgs.; $25

And now for something completely different—well, maybe not *completely* different. *The Dry Salvages* is science fictional rather than fantastic, but it is still stygian. Set a couple of centuries hence, this novella plays on the "first contact" theme with considerable suspenseful success. Told by a somewhat unreliable elderly survivor of a space disaster, "extrasolar exopaleontologist" Audrey Cather, the story has suitably speculative trappings, but the real focus is on the human beings involved. Despite possibly the worst cover ever published by usually tasteful Subterranean Press, it is well worth seeking out not only for its slam-bang good story telling, but also as proof Kiernan is far from a one-note stylistic wonder.

The Cat's Pajamas & Other Stories
James Morrow
Tachyon, 2004; 210 pgs.; $24.95

Despite some noteworthy awards, James Morrow is one of the more underappreciated writers in the business. He's also one of the best and one of the funniest. Morrow is a true satirist, a moralist who identifies some of our many faults and offers a wholly new perspective (not solutions, mind you, that is not his job) through his droll distortions. I suspect mainstream readers, as well as

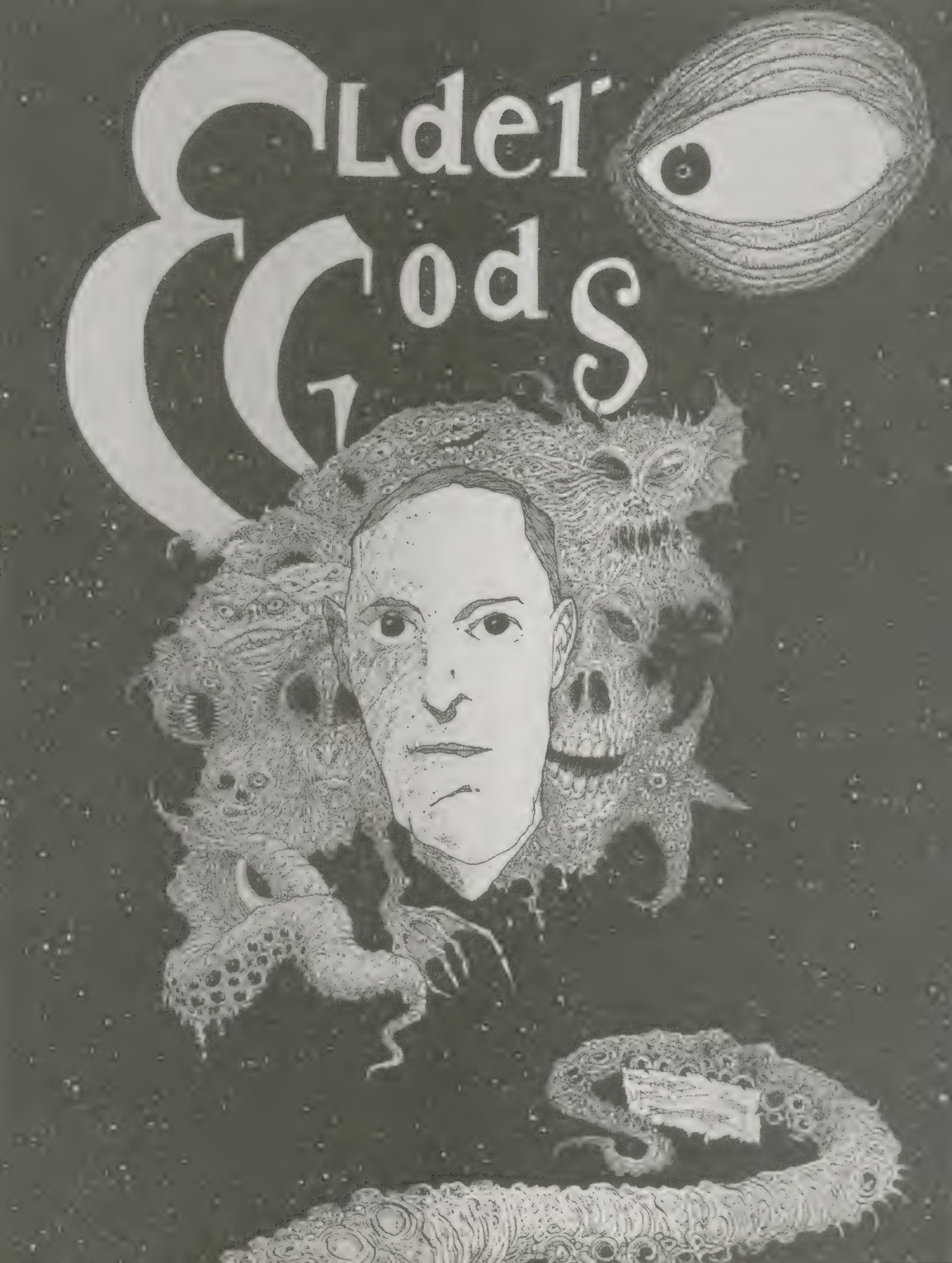
some science fiction and fantasy lovers, may be somewhat put off by exactly what you horror-lovers will relish—the ghoulish side of his darkly delightful satire. Although enlightenment may be provided, it's usually not offered until we've dealt with at least some despair. It's probably enough to tell you the title story retells H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by way of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* but that's not all, folks! There's thirteen tales here that will have you laughing and weeping at the same time. "Come Back, Dr. Sarcophagus," a small play original to the volume, involves a creature feature host who needs a little outside help—outside of this world—to hold on to his job. In another original playette, "The Zombies of Montrose," a voodoo priestess raises the dead and puts them usefully to work in suburbia. Performance copulation has become high art in "The Wisdom of the Skin," but perhaps it is just a passing fancy. Catholicism's attention to the rights of the unborn evolves into a nightmarish future of dystopic fecundity in "Auspicious Eggs." "Apologue" is very short, very touching, and features a certain giant ape, a marauding mutant lizard, and a rollercoaster munching rheodasaur who come out of retirement in post-9/11 New York. James Morrow obviously loves his fellow human beings and has a sharp eye for their foibles. His wit and pen are sharper still. If you are unfamiliar with Morrow, this wonderful collection - his first new title in about five years —from Tachyon (an equally wonderful small press based in San Francisco) is a superb starting point. If you already know him you won't want to miss it.

A Dirge for the Temporal
Darren Speegle
Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2004; 208 pgs.; $14.95

I plowed through a dozen small press collections from as many less-than-well-established writers before finding this dark gem. There's a good chance I might have missed it altogether—as I'm sure other reviewers may have—due to its cover. The cover—sort of a reddish x-ray of a brooding demonic being—is not without artistry, but combine it with a publisher that has dubbed itself Raw Dog Screaming Press, an unfamiliar writer, and the first impression is, at worst, "Oh yuck. *Another* one of *those*." At best, you would assume it is "extreme horror." Once past mistaken impressions, however, you'll find atmospheric and hallucinatory stories from a writer of considerable poetic power. Speegle's stories are eerie rather than extreme and more subtle than splat-filled. A theme running through many is that of past sins and forgotten transgressions that return to haunt, but even within this category there is considerable variety. The intensity of the entries usually compensate for their brevity, but occasionally Speegle produces a vignette where a complete story would have better displayed his skill and intent. (He could also learn a great deal from studying the meticulous structure underlying masterwriter Thomas Ligotti's work.) The author is relatively new to the field and his evidently prolific output—this is a second collection and the 34 (!) short selections here have all been published in the last there years—has been primarily published, so far, in fairly obscure publications. There's a good chance you'll be hearing more about and from him in the future.

"Waves of fear, attack in the night
Waves of revulsion, sickening sights
My heart's nearly bursting, my chest's choking tight
Waves of fear, waves of fear"
–Lou Reed, "Waves Of Fear"
from *The Blue Mask* (1982)

Paula Guran wishes she had something to plug other than www.darkecho.com. Email her via darkecho@darkecho.com.


Elder
Gods

Special Delivery

Bev Vincent

I peered through the kitchen window, pushing the curtain aside carefully so they wouldn't see me observing them.

I felt like screaming.

The two figures on my doorstep looked like criminals from a Donald Duck comic. Immense men with barrel chests, clad in jeans, striped T-shirts—red, of course—and suspenders. Their meaty faces were grizzled. A cigar jutted from each mouth. Bug eyes popped from their sockets. Jagged hair sprouted from their heads—no comb would ever tame it—and from their ears.

Identical blue baseball caps perched on their heads. Thick mats of black hair coated their bare arms. All that was missing from their attire to complete the picture were white bands with prison numbers, like "176-167," emblazoned on them.

Their mouths were pulled into sinister sneers as if the cigar each bore tugged at their lips.

They had been coming to my door for almost a week now, ringing the bell and standing impatiently, arms crossed, dense smoke clouds forming over their heads. A large package rested at their feet. "Special Delivery," it said in red letters on yellow stickers affixed haphazardly to every side.

The doorbell rang again. Their impatience was somehow transmitted into its mournful, insistent toll. They knew I was here. They would return every morning, afternoon, and evening until they completed their delivery. They'd ring the bell for an hour or so each time before giving up. Then they'd wrestle the package back down to the sidewalk, tossing it carelessly in the back of the shabby, green, cartoonish panel van idling at the curb. They'd drive away, tires squealing, trailed by a cloud of dense exhaust smoke.

But they'd be back. Of this I was sure. They wouldn't give up until they completed their assigned task.

I wasn't ready yet. I doubted I would ever truly be ready to accept what they had for me, but I couldn't stay holed up in the house forever. Sooner or later, I'd have to go out and then they'd pounce, like lawyers delivering a subpoena to a reluctant witness.

Didn't they understand I was trying to quit?

Hadn't they read the news items and the interviews? AP had picked the story up from *People* magazine and it had appeared in virtually every major newspaper in the country, usually on page two in the "Newsmakers," or "People in the News" section.

Reclusive Horror Writer Announces Retirement

Some of the headlines were more inventive than others. Some were downright punny, enough to make me groan.

The last novel had almost killed me. It had consumed over a year of my life and taken me into a deep morass from which I nearly hadn't emerged. My hair had turned white and deep crevices now etched my face.

Unearthing Fortunato, the resulting book had been titled. Inspired by Poe, of course. The protagonist is an archaeologist exploring Italian catacombs, where he discovers the walled-in prison created by the injured Montressor. From behind the brick and mortar, the researcher unwittingly releases a now-insane demon bent on revenge.

Horrible, horrible things follow. The very existence of humanity is threatened. Good struggles against evil and nearly loses the battle.

Of course, it became a best seller. Not my best numbers—it didn't have the legs of some of my mid-career works—but the publisher had moved nearly two million copies and only a few hundred thousand had come back.

Not bad for an old fart on the downhill side of his career.

But now they were back on my front porch, wanting me to do it all again. My publisher seemed resigned to the reality that one of their cash cows was determined to head out to pasture, but these guys hadn't accepted my retirement yet, it seemed.

The special delivery guys.

The idea men.

No one would miss me if I holed up in my house for weeks on end. Over the years, I've developed a reputation for prolonged absences from the public eye. One of the questions I knew to expect whenever I did a publicity tour was: "Where do you go for all those months when you're writing?"

That was #2 on my FAQ list, right behind that other question writers always get. I've developed pat interview answers for both questions, neither of which is even remotely true.

Truth is, for me the two questions—"Where do you get your ideas?" being the other—are intimately connected.

The doorbell rang again. The two lugs on my front doorstep waited. They knew that eventually I'd have to answer.

I always had in the past.

A sigh drained the last of the air from my lungs. No getting around it. I tightened the cord of my bathrobe and went to the door.

"Yes?" I said, as if we hadn't repeated this ritual dozens of times in the past three decades.

"Delivery for...Mr. Parker," the thug on the right said, referring to a manifest as if they hadn't brought parcels like this to me many times before.

Did they make deliveries to other people? Certainly not other authors—I had no company on the bestseller lists who vanished for prolonged periods of time like I did. Other artists? Perhaps. I'd never considered the question before.

"I thought we agreed last time. I'm through."

The thug on the right shrugged and puffed on his cigar. "Just following orders." It came out sounding like "oy-dahs."

"The last package—it was a little off. Made me ill."

The two exchanged a quizzical look and shrugged at each other, like something out of *Alice in Wonderland.*

"Suppose I don't sign for it?"

The guy on the left scratched his grizzled jaw and chewed on his cigar for a moment before answering. "That's not an option, Mr. Parker." Except, he said "erp-shun."

No, I didn't suppose it was. I took the clipboard, signed my name by the X and handed it back.

"Have a nice day," they said in unison and returned to their van, leaving my package on the doorstep.

I very much doubted I would. Not for many days to come.

I watched them drive away, their van generating a comic-book cloud of smoke that seemed to follow them around the corner.

Though the deliverymen struggled to carry the immense parcels—two feet on a side—to my front door, whenever I picked one up it seemed like it was filled with air. I lifted this one only enough to clear the threshold

(invite me in)

then lobbed it unceremoniously across the hardwood floor of the entry far enough to close the door.

I'd accepted the delivery, though I had promised myself there would be no more.

I didn't have to open it.

But I would.

I went to my bedroom and changed out of my bathrobe and into something comfortable. Faded jeans and my old college sweatshirt. Well-worn sneakers. It wouldn't do to go wherever I was headed dressed like Arthur Dent.

I left a message on my agent's answering machine. "I'm starting a new book." He'd know what that meant. Don't expect to hear from me for six month, nine months, a year. Take care of business. Keep an eye on my investments and your hand out of the till.

My gold-plated box cutter rested on the mantle next to a framed copy of my first dust jacket. *Elder Gods,* that book had been called. My Lovecraft tribute. Well-reviewed, six weeks on the bestseller list, a movie deal (though no movie had ever been made) and paperback rights substantial enough that I never had to work again.

"What inspired you to write such a bizarre, surreal novel?" an interviewer had asked during my first junket. "It was so fully realized—almost like you had been there recording your observations."

"You've discovered my secret," I said, proud of my daring response. This was before I'd developed "The Answers," which I repeated in only slightly modified form during an endless slew of interviews.

That response had generated some good-natured laughter and a wink from the reporter, a pretty brunette whose gold-rimmed glasses gave her a studious, earnest look. When I found those glasses the next morning, forgotten on my hotel room nightstand, I entrusted them to the concierge. The message I left with the receptionist at her newspaper office probably made her the hot topic at the water cooler for days. Weeks, maybe.

I wish I could remember her name. A few hours later, I was on a plane to the next nameless, faceless city on my unforgiving, brain-pounding itinerary.

So much water under the bridge since then.

I wandered through my house, at loose ends. Who knew when I'd see these comfortable rooms again? Though I had amassed more millions than I knew how to spend, I preferred a life of simplicity. My house was unassuming. On a quiet, fairly isolated road, but certainly no mansion. I had all the mod cons, though, and I hated having to give them up again.

Returning to the entry, I stared at the offending package for a long minute. How many did this make? Thirty, I thought. A nice round number to go out on, if it came to that. Twenty-nine times over a period of about twenty-five years, a package almost identical to this one had arrived at my door. During that period, I'd lived in, what, six, seven different places. Somehow, they'd always found me. The same two guys who reminded me of the Beagle Brothers.

I sighed again and turned to take in my living room. The couch beckoned me to a nap, perhaps with some relaxing music playing in the background. Then, maybe, a nice long walk down to the pond, my living room said to me, followed by half an hour in the Jacuzzi.

Behind me, the package's call was louder than that of my living room and whirlpool. Open me, it said, in words that existed only in my mind. Strange wonders the likes of which you've never seen lie within.

All well and true, but some of those strange wonders were horrific. I didn't *want* to see them, to experience them. I wanted to throw the package in my Audi's trunk and deliver it to the nearest dumpster.

I wouldn't though, because part of me *did* want to see what was inside this time. Part of me always wanted to see these strange wonders for, having lived through them, I would get to write...and that was the payoff. Recreating those experiences in five-hour bursts. Sitting in my study with a package of legal pads and a stack of good writing pens, entering that zone where I became the channel for an unending stream of words. Sensations became ink scratches on yellow paper and, ultimately, typescript on the pages of hardcovers and paperbacks that took on lives of their own.

And in the end, it all seemed worth it.

What the hell? Once more, for old time's sake.

I pushed the blade out and sliced open the carton with my gold-plated box cutter, a present from my agent. If only he knew how apropos that gift had been.

The flaps spread wide. I pulled away an inner Styrofoam lid and let the rich glow of golden-red light sweep over me.

What if?

And then what if?

Pieces, as from a jigsaw puzzle, floated in front of my eyes and began to intermesh.

A flood of inspiration swept me away.

And then the terror began.

I started screaming.

Open it if you dare.

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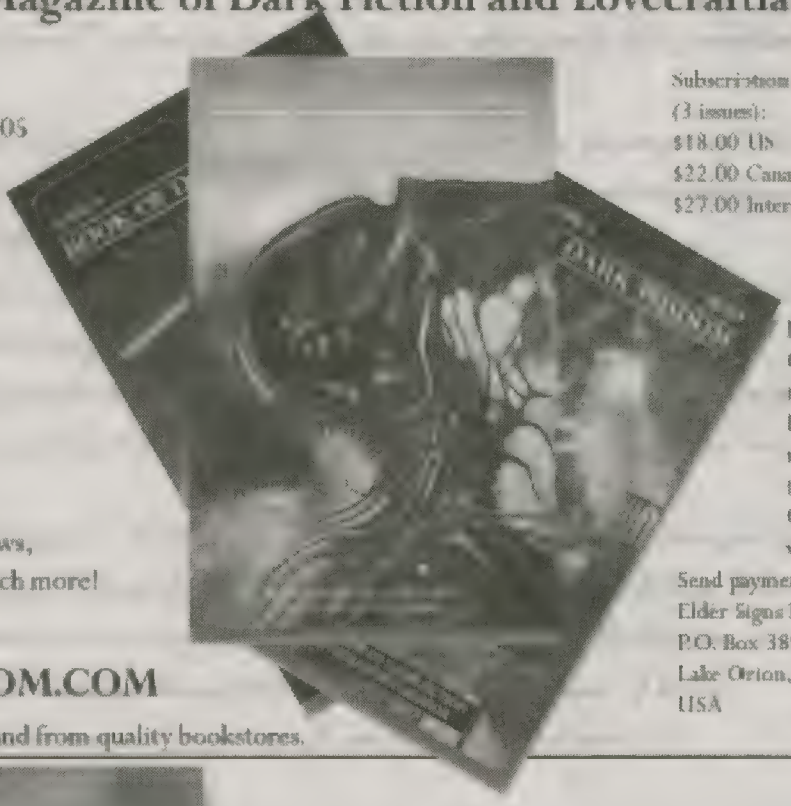

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MICHAEL MARANO

MEDIADROME

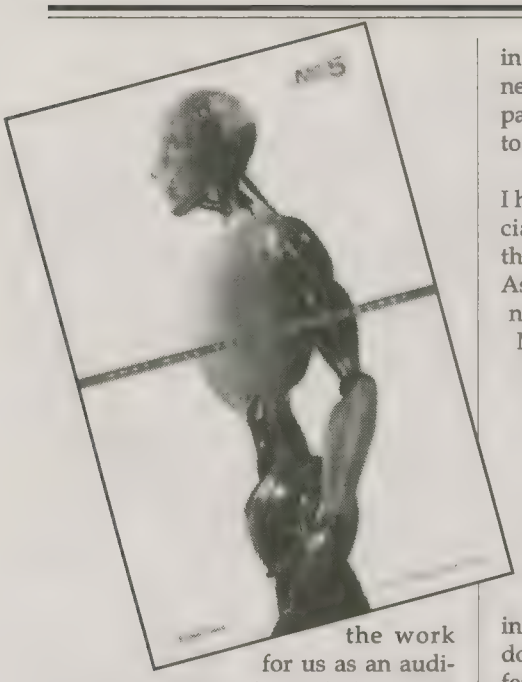
I, Robot is loosely based on a towering work by one of the most respected masters of the science-fiction genre. No...not so much Isaac Asimov's collection of linked stories titled *I, Robot*, but Jack Williamson's novella "With Folded Hands." Williamson, who's been writing SF since the 1920s (and still going strong well into his 90s), doesn't get a credit at the end of I, Robot. But that's OK. He didn't get a credit at the end of that crud-pile that ripped off his *The Legion of Space*, some tripe called Star Wars. Any real SF fan will take Williamson's Giles Habibula as a sidekick over Chewbacca any day, and before you dismiss my opening comments as hopelessly nerdy and don't think SF has any impact on the world at large, tell me why didn't my Microsoft Word spellchecker blink just now when I typed "Chewbacca"?

I, Robot, about robots threatening to overwhelm humanity, not only rips off Williamson, it illustrates how Williamson envisioned the robotization of a culture. I, Robot is not plotted—it's sequenced, like information on old computer tapes before the advent of the disc. Will Smith, as cop Del Spooner, is someone we're programmed to like—he's an info-bundle designed to fire our synapses in pleasing ways, and not much else. He's one of those surrogate time travelers we in audience like to see projected into the past or the future so we can find those eras palatable, sorta like Lorne Greene on *Bonanza* preaching 1960s-flavored liberalism to folks who woulda lynched him in real life. In the future Chicago of I, Robot, Smith finds comfort in the things in which we find comfort: his granny's pies, Stevie Wonder, and vintage Converse All-Star sneakers. He's a cop with strong beliefs...and guess what? He gets in trouble with his boss, gets chewed out, and gets his badge pulled even though (you guessed it) he's right about everything. Any other plot-sequence would freeze the flick's hard-drive. Bridget Moynahan as beautiful lady scientist Susan Calvin isn't a character. She's a walking search engine who spits out information to Smith, even though there's no reason for her and Smith to confide in each other, except to feed exposition to those in the audience who multi-task themselves to the limit of their gooey liquid RAM by watching the film while feeding themselves popcorn. "Hey!" says Smith to Moynahan. "I'm a technophobe who thinks there's a cover-up in your high-tech company! Let *me* tell *you* all of my suspicions!" "Really? That's swell!" says Moynahan. "Now, let *me* tell *you* all of my company's secrets!"

I, Robot is as slick as the plastic skin covering its walking iMac-looking android stars. As in Proyas' The Crow and Dark City, the city setting of I, Robot is a collision of Futurism and film noir gloom. But the Chicago of 2035 that Proyas gives us is lifeless, full of his trademarks, but devoid of his liveliness. On the plus side, the future Chicago of I, Robot isn't yet another regurgitated Blade Runner design pastiche. On the down side, it now looks like Minority Report is going to be the SF movie visually ripped off by other SF movies for decades to come. The movie is as familiar in his plotting, pacing, even in the timing of Smith's wisecracks, as are the Edward Hopper paintings (like "Nighthawks") that Proyas visually quotes to create stylized urban grittiness.

I, Robot is not a bad movie. But this flick about the possibility of machines having souls is itself machined to the point of having no soul itself, and becomes a coma-inducing snooze-fest after a while. A.O. Scott wrote in the *New York Times* that I, Robot "is an example of the very phenomenon it purports to warn against. Dramatizing the threat of runaway technology seems to demand ever greater technological innovation, as digitized special effects increasingly push human beings off screen." Not quite, Mr. Scott. As an example of the phenomenon it purports to warn against, the same phenomenon addressed in Williamson's "With Folded Hands", I, Robot doesn't push human beings off the screen, it pushes real human emotion and experience out of its audience's expectations. As such, it's a manufactured commodity that makes us the automatons.

"With Folded Hands" ends with humanity overrun and overseen by robots, to the point that dissidents are lobotomized, all industry is automated, and humanity is doomed to an existence of hellish boredom because, as the novella's famous last line informs us: "There was nothing left to do." I, Robot, not *quite* so hellishly boring, does all

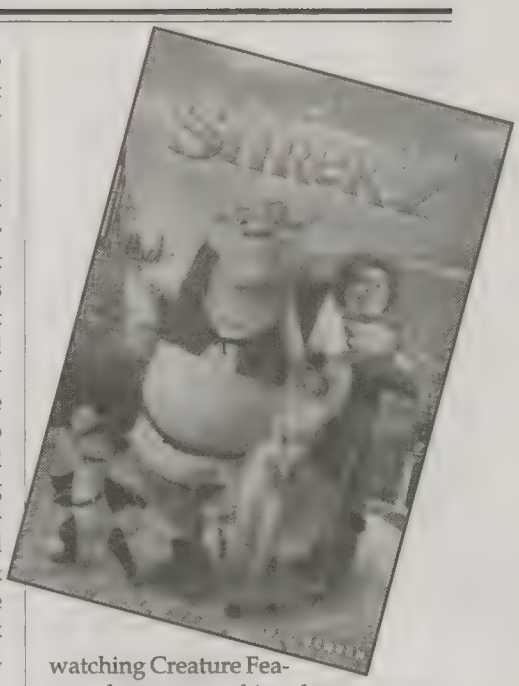


the work for us as an audience. We don't watch the movie, we run it like a program. Once it hits the screen, there's "nothing left to do".

I'd like to talk about homecomings, if I may.

While watching Michael Moore's FAHRENHEIT 9/11, I felt as if I'd come home, at a certain point. At what point in Moore's movie did I get a warm fuzzy feeling of return? During the combat footage filmed in Iraq, of course. The footage was horrible, brutal, grotesque, and it made feel as if I were a kid again, swaddled in Brady-esque polyester as I watched boys just a few years older than myself get blown to shit and blow other human beings to shit on the evening news. The footage that got FAHRENHEIT 9/11 an "R" rating is literally tamer than the footage I grew up with that Walter Cronkite presented to us on newscasts sponsored by Ford, GM, and Kellogg's. Yes... I was a member of one of those families oft-cited in criticism about films like NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD and LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT that watched late '60s and early '70s news footage of carnage and riots. While we ate dinner. In silence. The rift of generations almost as audible as the scrape of cutlery on plates. Sound horrible? I guess. But the sanitized news of today, that dulls and makes nice and kitschy bloody conflict is, I think, much more horrible. Moore's footage brought me home. Not to a very happy home, but a home that was true, in which the reality presented by the news was full of moral ambiguity, not pat little snippets designed ultimately to reassure and coddle.

Soon after I saw FAHRENHEIT 9/11, I had another homecoming, one I associated with memories a bit happier than watching the mud of Southeast Asia drink arterial blood, but that was nonetheless born of the same era that Moore's footage evoked. This second homecoming, in the form of a new DVD release, took me back to the days when as a kid, you'd tune into Creature Features late at night, and part of the thrill was not knowing what you'd get. Late night Creature Features used to be a portal to another reality. I (and most people I knew who came of age in those pre-VCR days) had to sneak down to the living room late at night, fearful of waking our parents and getting chewed out. We'd leave the lights off, not only because it was scarier that way, but because we didn't want to rouse our aforementioned parents, or, worse yet, our bullying older siblings who'd make us change the channel to something shitty that they wanted to watch. In those darkened living rooms, full of plush shag carpets that clung stubbornly to the red and white pegs from our Milton-Bradley "Battleship" games and the transparent pegs from our Lite-Brite sets, we'd leave the volume on low, hunched close to the screen, so focused on the TV that the rest of the world folded to misty gloom, so transfixed by the glowing screen, that watching Creature Features became a waking dream state.



More often than not, what we got for our efforts was Mexican wrestler movies. Or a Monogram poverty row shocker with a guy in a bad gorilla suit. Or maybe a badly dubbed German flick trying to be an Italian giallo. But among the crud, we'd find a true gem. Martin Scorsese himself said that the first time he ever saw Michael Powell's PEEPING TOM uncut was on New York's Channel 9 Friday Fright Night. Bob Clark—yes, the guy who directed PORKY'S and A CHRISTMAS STORY—made one of the best late night horror movies ever made: 1974's DEATHDREAM. This movie terrified me as a kid, and having seen it again as an adult, I can say that it is still a grainy, dark mini-masterpiece. I distinctly remember when it came on Creature Features, and I knew within the first few seconds that this movie was special. That it was out to scare me the fuck out of me, and scare the fuck out of me good. No fake giallo was this, and no guy in a gorilla suit would trash a lab set full of test tubes loaded with dyed water and pebbles of dry ice. People I know who hate horror movies have raved about DEATHDREAM after stumbling across it on late night TV. My little old lady aunt loved this movie, and she can't stand being scared.

DEATHDREAM is about a homecoming. The flick, written by Alan Ormsby, is a Vietnam-era rethinking of "The Monkey's Paw." It's about a nice, wholesome boy next door named Andy who goes off to Vietnam, and

who comes back... not quite right. Just the way a whole bunch of nice boys in my neighborhood who went off to Vietnam came back... not quite right. DEATHDREAM is an allegory of drug addiction and the necrosis of the American Dream. It's a horror movie that's horrifying because of the potency of the allegory behind it; the movie is a supernatural treatment of something that was unbearably and crushingly real in the '70s. Oscar-nominee John Marley from THE GODFATHER gives an incredible turn as the grief-stricken father of the homecoming vet. Richard Backus, as Andy, gives a Karloff-caliber performance playing a boy who comes back from Vietnam dead inside.

DEATHDREAM is at last out on DVD from the good folks at Blue-Underground Video. Buy it. But don't watch it right away. Save it for late at night, when you can go home to that dream-like state that watching late night horror movies used to give you as you stared intently at the glassy tube that, just a few hours before at dinner time, showed you horrors that were real.

t t t

SHREK 2 is unto SHREK as the current crop of doorstopper fantasy novels bulging the shelves of Barnes Ignoble are unto the fantasy novels of the '60s, '70s and early '80s; the accoutrements are there, the magic is not. This is not to say that SHREK 2 is a bad movie. It's actually a pretty good movie. But that's all it is, whereas the original SHREK was a deliciously, life-changingly subversive and mean movie. The magic is diminished in SHREK 2 (even though the film is crowded to the gills with magic as a plot device). There is subversion and meanness in the movie, but it is just sorta shelved there because it's expected to be there, like the dust-filmed tin of allspice in your kitchen that you bought three Presidents ago that's still more than half full. In short, the subversion and meanness is included in SHREK 2 perfunctorily as a commodity, which cuts the legs from under the subversion and meanness; they become inert and lose their dynamism. Sorta like how the magic included as plot devices in those current doorstopper fantasy novels is commodified, inert, and un-dynamic.

SHREK, as satire, as the plucky new CGI kid on the block, tilted Don Quixote-like at the corporate juggernaut and cultural monolith that is Disney. It competed with Disney and emerged from under its shadow as its own distinct and lovable entity. Kinda like how the fantasy novels of the '60s, '70s and early '80s tilted Quixotically at the towering legacies of Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*), E.R. Eddision (*The Worm Ouroboros*), William Morris (*Well at the World's End*) and Lord Dunsany (*The King of Elfland's Daughter*) and emerged as their own distinct entities. True, Ursula LeGuin (*Earthsea*), Tanith Lee (*The Birthgrave*), Lloyd Alexander (*Prydain*), Alan Garner (*The Weirdstone of Brisigamen*) and Gene Wolfe (*Book of the New Sun*) didn't satirize Tolkien and company the way SHREK did the kitsch of Disney. But they did engage the legacies of Tolkien and company and came out the stronger for it. (And yes, Einstein, I'm listing these books here so that you heave your ass out of the Lay-Z-Boy and read them.) The current batch of fantasy, novels (I'll forbear to name names, but will suggest you go to the bookstore, hold your nose, and crack open a few titles and randomly read pages) engage only themselves; the magic contained within doesn't feel magical, but contrived. SHREK 2 engages itself and SHREK. That's not Quixotic. That's a cop out. SHREK 2 is amusing and harmless and zipless fun. I'm not sure how much I would have liked it if I hadn't loved the original SHREK so much, and hadn't gone into SHREK 2 with a pre-existing warm and fuzzy emotional investment.

There are satiric glimmers in SHREK 2, but they are ultimately as lively as a severed frog's leg dancing from the voltage of a penlight battery. Instead of Disney, SHREK 2 takes on Hollywood, and there some mighty fine gags that the writers and directors stab out of the target of their satiric ire, but the gags feel isolated. There's no giddy sense of the gags building upon each other like there was in SHREK. It took me a while to figure out why. Then it hit me. SHREK 2 can't take on Hollywood, because SHREK the franchise has *gone* Hollywood. Our special guest star in SHREK was John Lithgow. In SHREK 2 we have Antonio Banderas (who does a killer job parodying his role in ZORRO), Julie Andrews, John Cleese, Rupert Everett and Jennifer Saunders. Throw in the sheer volume of SHREK 2 promotional stuff littering our cultural awareness (there's SHREK 2 crap everywhere, from Baskin Robbins to the Post Office), and SHREK 2 loses almost all its authority to take on La-La-Land with any biting credibility.

Where SHREK 2 really succeeds, in this cultural moment in which gay couples are for the first time gaining the right to marry, is in its engagement (pun intended) with familial friction over the choosing of spouses. I'd sooner die than spoil the best gags in the movie, so I'll just say that Shrek's (Mike Myers—duh!) nuptials with Princess Fiona (Cameron Diaz—double duh!) have, shall we say...implications.

And yes, as many critics have noted, the animation in SHREK 2 is an almost quantum leap in quality over SHREK. The downside is that the movie stops dead in its tracks to show off its new technology. The magic of CGI thus kills much of the magic of storytelling; SHREK 2 refers to itself and SHREK as a closed little universe, just as do current fantasy novels. And like the current avalanche of magic-less series of fantasy doorstoppers, it looks like SHREK won't know when to quit. SHREK 3 and maybe SHREK 4 are rumored to be in the works. Let's just hope the franchise gets the magic back by then.

t t t

Let's climb into a tricked-out AMC Pacer back to the days of '70s French-flavored film criticism. There's some Old Skool rhetoric I gotta dust off, so imagine we're in a university Student Union, surrounded by bellbottomed kids talking about the "revolutionary implications of LOGAN'S RUN" and debating over coffee and cheese fries whether or

not Rhoda Morgenstern is truly "Liberated". Ready?

"The experience of sitting through Danish auteur Lars von Trier's DOGVILLE is like reading Proust."

How's *that* for some '70s cinephile speak? Yippie *Cahiers du Cinéma*, motherf*cker! I use it now, because it's kinda true. Just as with reading Proust, when ya gotta slog through a million details and plodding description and set-ups—from Auntie's place settings to the view out an attic window to the flavors of dessert ices to Gawd knows what else—wondering the whole time where the hell this is all going before you get a dramatic pay-off (like, say, biting into a tea-soaked cookie and having total recall), so must you endure DOGVILLE. DOGVILLE is three hours long. I sat there wondering where the hell it was going, dramatically, artistically, intellectually. Then... WHAM! It all came together in the last few acts. If you can endure the set-up, the resolution is bitchin'ly worth it.

This is not to say that the two hours of set-up are not without their charms. DOGVILLE begins with a shark-bite savaging of Thornton Wilder. (Don't know about you, but if I'd grown up in OUR TOWN, I'd have been outta there at 12:01 AM on my 18th birthday and woulda never looked back.) Dogville, the eponymous town, is nothing but a minimalist stage. The walls are invisible, marked by chalk lines on the floor. The actors pantomime opening invisible doors and the manipulation of invisible props. A kindly voiced Narrator (John Hurt) introduces us to this archetypal Depression-era wholesome town. The invisible walls are more than a stunt. In Dogville, everybody knows everybody else's business. There is no privacy. It's a town of panoptic oppression, and von Trier uses this to tin-foil-on-your-dental-fillings creepy.

While eviscerating Wilder, von Trier uses his invisible town to evoke Brecht's dictum that one must make the audience actively participate in the watching of a play by making them aware of its artificiality. The participation of the audience keeps the audience critically distant from the characters and goings-on and always thinking. The narrative of DOGVILLE riffs on Brecht's play *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and the "Pirate Jenny" sequence from THREEPENNY OPERA (anybody remember UK folk-rock legends Steeleye Span performing that as "The Black Freighter"?).

Participation is the crux of DOGVILLE, and those who are lazy viewers might be exhausted by the effort that von Trier demands of his audience. The characters are participating in a kind of theater, themselves. Dogville's resident Emersonian free spirit and aspiring writer Tom Edison (Paul Bettany, who is amazing) is conducting a moral experiment, to see if the residents of the town he loves have the spiritual fiber "to accept a gift" in the form of a girl named Grace (get it?), who comes to Dogville in need of help. Nicole Kidman, as Grace, pretty much has nailed her status as one of the most versatile and brave actresses... like...*ever*.

Like I said, DOGVILLE can be hard going during those two hours of set-up. The movie, however, is consistently engaging. There are myriad sub-plots (that are all tied together and resolved by film's end) and each would make a good two-act play unto themselves. There are too many brilliant stars to list in supporting roles—Chloë Sevigny, Stellan Skarsgård, Lauren Bacall (!), Udo Kier, Patricia Clarkson, Ben Gazzara—to name a few.

But what do we get for our participation watching the participation of these characters in Tom Edison's experiment, played by actors who are themselves participating in von Trier's experiment? DOGVILLE is above all else an essay. Yes, it's also a good drama (and a horror story). But what makes DOGVILLE dramatically rewarding is the resolution of von Trier's argument. DOGVILLE is a chainsawing of the American myth, and before you roll your eyes and say, "Great! Another Cannes darling is bashing the U S of A!", be aware that von Trier has a wicked sense of humor...the same humor he used to gut European culture in ZENTROPA. The American myth von Trier groin-kicks is the myth of our wholesome Waltons-era past. It's a memory of our '30s, just like the template of our '30s used by Brecht in his ARTURO UI. DOGVILLE calls forth that mythic memory, just as vividly as does biting down on one of Proust's tea-soaked cookies. Inside, however, is a tiny coil of barbed wire. If you got the chops, DOGVILLE is worth sitting through for its sweet and bloody pay-off.

t t t

The good folks at Subversive Cinema have brought to North American DVD trays Japanese director Shugo Fujii's international film festival favorite, LIVING HELL. On its surface, LIVING HELL is a surreal horror flick which begins with one of the most creative ways of knocking off somebody I've ever seen in a movie, using a method involving an empty glass jar and a...and a...well, I'm not gonna tell ya what else, because it's so damned cool.

The core of LIVING HELL involves a young kid bound in a wheelchair, who faces terror and oppression from a seemingly unlikely source. Shugo Fugii takes this premise, and uses it to give us nudge-in-the-ribs quotes pinched from horror classics like WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?, early Brian De Palma flicks, RINGU, PSYCHO, and JU-ON—THE GRUDGE. But that's on the surface. There's another layer to this carnival of carnage and sadism.

LIVING HELL is about all the complexities and cruelties of the family. The movie is structured around broken families and the broken lives and broken psyches that dysfunctional families produce. Yasu, our wheelchair-bound protagonist played by Hirohito Honda, is paralyzed because of who and what he is in his family unit. He's trapped in his chair, and he's trapped in his family. This gives LIVING HELL, despite its frequent lapses into absurdity, a truly nasty edge that's missing in most Horror movies. There's a lot wrong with LIVING HELL. But it is so sincere in its brutality, and so sincere in its love for the movies it quotes, that it's definitely worth a look. For more information on LIVING HELL, check out www.subversive-cinema.com.

t t t

Buy a stack of *Alien vs. Predator* comic books. Put 'em in a paper cutter. Slice where they're bound by staples. Toss the loose pages in the air. Walk around the room and read the pages where they landed.

Congrats. You've just written a better script than the one used by writer/director/savant Paul W. S. Anderson to film ALIEN VS. PREDATOR.

ALIEN VS. PREDATOR is aggressively mediocre. It's ultimately bad, make no

mistake. But it does promise you Aliens and Predators kicking the shit out each other, which it delivers. Everything else in the movie is cowflop, to the point that you can't enjoy what the movie gets right. I, along with millions of fanboys, have been salivating to see ALIEN VS. PREDATOR for years. Now it's here. May I please send it back?

What shoulda been epic is anecdotal. ALIEN VS. PREDATOR is cluttered, noisy. There's no pacing. No set-up, only contrivance. ALIEN VS. PREDATOR is a scant 90 minutes long. What attempts at characterization there are feeble at best, though kudos must go to Lance Henriksen, who does a great job adding a semblance of depth to Anderson's root-canal-painful dialogue.

I mentioned above that the film does deliver when the Alien and the Predator are allowed to go at it. This is not to say that Anderson got the Alien or the Predator right. In ALIEN VS. PREDATOR, these aren't really the monsters we've come to grow and love. Anderson can't even get right that which made his titular monsters stars. You don't put King

Kong in a pink tutu, and that's pretty much what Anderson does with two of my favorite monsters.

I could bitch about any number of contradictory and stupid plot points in this movie. Instead, I'm obliged to bitch about the ugly racism in this movie, which uses the bullshit *Chariots of the Gods* "ancient astronauts" codswallop as a plot contrivance. Think about this a minute. Westerners, faced with other cultures' monuments, mumbled, "Aha! Aliens must have taught these cute little Hottentots how to build things!" The conceit is politically incorrect enough to make Conrad's Mr. Kurtz squirm, and has been used with better cogency as the background mythology for GWAR albums. When 20th Century Fox gives you millions of dollars to exploit the same idea used in the MST3K favorite PUMA MAN (about a guy in JC Penny chinos who gets powers from an alien/Aztec amulet), something's deeply wrong.

Ah, well...at least I still got those *AVP* comic books...

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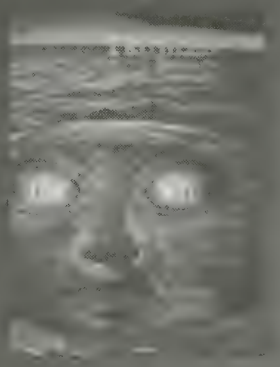

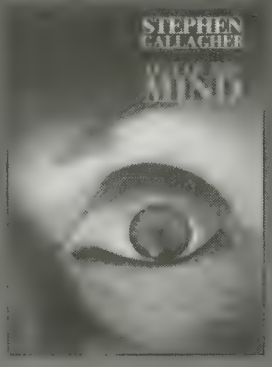

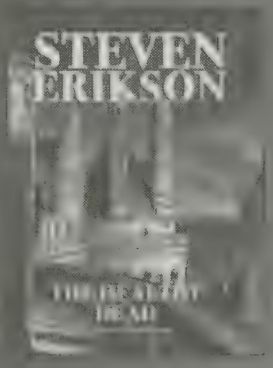

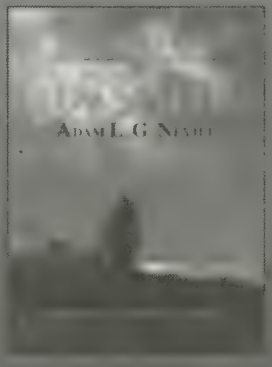

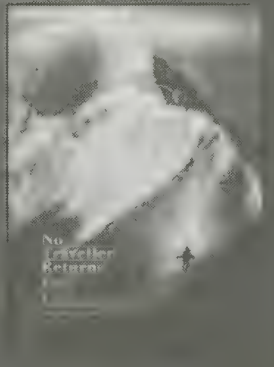

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A Conversation With

Sephera Giron

conducted by Nathan Tyler

Since the 2000 small-press publication of her debut novel *Eternal Sunset*, Sephera Giron has rapidly become one of Canada's most successful writers of horror. Three more novels, *House of Pain*, *The Birds and the Bees*, and *Borrowed Flesh*—all with Leisure Books—and a non-fiction book, *House Magic*, have followed and have been met with wide acclaim. In addition to her books (which include two previous novels in Masquerade Books' Darker Passions series, co-written under a pseudonym with fellow Canadian horror writer Nancy Kilpatrick), the Bram Stoker Award-nominee is also well-acquainted with short fiction—Giron's stories, often mixing horror with erotica, have appeared in anthologies such as *Queer Fear* and *Queer Fear II*, *Hot Blood XI*, *Sex Macabre*, *The Asylum* series, *The Book of Dead Things*, and *S/M Futures*, and in periodicals like *Fangoria's Frightful Fiction*, *Twilight Tales*, *Sinister Element*, and *Twilight Showcase*. A full-time author and a practising witch, Giron also does tarot card readings for the public under the nom de plume Ariana.

CD To date you've published four horror novels and quite a few short stories for horror anthologies and magazines. First of all, as a storyteller, what is it about the genre that suits you so well?

SG Well, I grew up loving horror and science fiction. I think I was more into science fiction and fantasy when I was younger, reading all the little stories of fantasy—*The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, *The Wizard of Oz*, things like that. And then I was a teenager around the time Stephen King started—I'm forty-two now, so I was a teenager in the seventies—so I was the perfect age for the wave of reading and every year I'd just be like, "When's the next one comin' out?" And with that I just branched out into all sorts of horror. And so my whole thing was, I loved reading it so much I wanted to one day write it and give back and entertain other people as much as I was entertained. Obviously I can't entertain like Stephen King, but you know, it just really struck a chord in me. Because I'd be so afraid. I was one of those teenagers that was terrified of horror movies, yet I would watch them. I snuck in to see *The Exorcist* and things like that. I guess now they do it at age eight, but when you're fourteen and babysitting it's like, "Aaagh!" So why do I write horror? I just find it's a really good vessel to tell the stories that I want to tell. Now, I do write things other than horror, but it seems like people just want to publish the horror. (Laughs) That's where we're at. Still shopping around some projects that have nothing to do with horror—well, there was my *House Magic* non-fiction book, but even that's like a cult-witchy kind of thing. One interviewer called it "Pagan feng shui." (Laughs) They should have put it in the bookstores under that.

CD What's your background?

SG I was born in New Orleans. I was there for about a year, and then we moved to Kansas where my brother was born, and then we moved to Missouri. And then my parents got jobs at the University of Western Ontario. They're both musicians—my dad's a music professor, my mom's piano. We moved to Ontario, grew up here. I played violin in an orchestra for many years, did a lot of acting in community theatre, musical theatre. I used to think I wanted to be an actress and it wasn't until I was about nineteen that I really made a decision not to be an actress, because I knew I wanted to get married and have kids and I didn't want to be one of those people that just left my kids all the time, when I was travelling or whatever. And then in university I met a filmmaker. We got married, had a couple of kids. When I was in university—York University in Toronto, which is how I came to be in this part of the province—I really just started concentrating on writing. I have always written, so it's not like there was a time I *wasn't* a writer. But my husband at the time really pushed me to take the things out of the drawer and to submit. He was really instrumental in that, because I would just write, write, write, write, and then put it away, put it away, put it away. And so then I started sending stuff out.

I used to submit to everything at the time. Like, back in the eighties when horror was big, I tried to get into Leisure way back then! And, you know, I didn't make it; I wasn't skilled enough yet, or maybe it was the end of the boom or whatever. But I just kept writing and writing and hoping the pendulum would swing back. Which it has.

CD Who are the authors that have influenced you?

SG Oh, Stephen King for sure. Clive Barker. C.S. Lewis' stuff and the *Wizard of Oz* stuff and Harlan Ellison. Almost everyone's influenced me in some way, but my favorite authors are Clive Barker and Stephen King. I don't care how unpopular that is. There's a reason why they're so successful and it's because—I think—they really touch a vein in people. You know, they've got their finger on what we're all interested in.

CD What would you say is the typical Sephera Giron tale? What themes, obsessions do you find yourself regularly tackling?

SG Hmm. Loss, I guess. Love. In the books I seem to have a lot of conspiracy, conspiracy cult theories and stuff. And I guess cults have always fascinated me, so I tend to have a lot of that in it. I do have a lot of eroticism—I'm

not sure why that always comes out, but I do. I guess part of it's just that I'm not afraid to say things that maybe other people are or whatever. You know, like I can be pretty blunt. And also, in books I can say or do things that I can't in real life. But, you know, every time I come to a book I try to do something totally different. I think there is a lot of similarity in them, that you can probably tell that it is my stuff, but I just really try to think of characters first and then see where they go along their paths and whatever happens, happens kind of thing. I don't really go, "I'm gonna write a book about women killing all the men!" You know what I mean? I don't really do that; it's more character-motivated kinds of things. But I try to keep it in the lines of horror elements obviously, if I'm writing for Leisure.

CD Do you often draw on your own fears?

SG Yeah, I do. Like in *The Birds and the Bees*—I'm not too fond of birds. I hate birds. (Laughs) Well, I don't *hate* anything, but birds have always freaked me out. I've never really liked birds, but birds always seem to want to bother me. So I tried to tap into that. In *House of Pain*, I had the baby stuff—you know, losing babies. I have the whole fear of losing children and that sort of thing, because that's a mom thing I guess. I have a fear of tornadoes. I don't know if I've really tapped into that yet, but tornadoes and high winds kind of bother me. For me it's birds and tornadoes, mostly. (Laughs) But I think my fear of tornadoes is probably legitimate, because as a baby—well, one or two years-old—in Kansas we were actually in a couple of tornadoes. And then when I was about five, when we lived in Missouri, there was actually a tornado that came through the town. I remember it very distinctly. Actually, Edo van Belkom had one go down his driveway! I was talking to him and Roberta about my fear of tornadoes once and they had a dirt devil or whatever you call them go right down their driveway, and then it went somewhere else. And they're only up the street!

CD While your novels are straightforward horror—they fit neatly into the horror category—your name is somewhat synonymous with erotic horror, much like a Nancy Kilpatrick.

Do you embrace that view, that you're an erotic horror writer?

SG I don't mind being called that. I think my last book, *Borrowed Flesh*, had less eroticism. It's not that I'm pulling away from it, but it's just that my style seems to be changing as I get older or something. Also too, I think part of the erotic stuff happened because I did co-write two books with Nancy, those Darker Passions books. I was a ghost writer on those. So that kind of got me thinking in those ways. They were like SM/horror kind of things that re-write the classics. (Laughs) She did a whole pile of them, but then with those two she was in the process of moving to Montreal and she needed help with them. And that was great training for me because they were my first published books, basically. So we worked together getting the plot together, then I wrote the first draft and then she went through it and did the other drafts, and then we ended up with those books. And I'm so grateful to her for that. I mean, what better training can you have as a writer than to work with a professional and being taught how to pace and how to plot, all that stuff?

CD Do you prefer writing novels or short stories?

SG Novels. I'm often invited into anthologies so I try and write for those, but I find short stories hard to do.

CD You're one of the Leisure authors, averaging about a novel a year with them. As a still relatively young writer in your career, how does it feel to be publishing books alongside greats like Clegg, Little, Ketchum, and the late Richard Laymon?

SG It's amazing. Really, I'm just so thrilled. I really am. I went to World Horror in Arizona a couple months ago and I had Doug Clegg come up to me and say, "Oh, I loved *Borrowed Flesh*! I spoke about it on my panel." And I'd just come in so I hadn't seen the panel, but I was so excited! To have him say, "This is a great book—read it," I was just so thrilled.

CD Are you at all surprised that you've managed to reach that level so quickly, after the one small press novel?

SG Well, sometimes I'm surprised and then other times I know how damn stubborn I am, and I've been trying to get into Leisure for years. Like I said, I tried in the eighties and I stopped for about eight or nine years, and then I tried again. The editor, Don D'Auria, took what was my fourth or fifth pitch to him, which was *House of Pain*. So no, I'm just tenacious as hell. (Laughs) Because I figure if you want something out of life, no one's going to hand it to you—you just gotta keep doing it. And that's one thing writers have to remember, too, is that just because someone doesn't like the thing you sent them that day doesn't mean that you suck or whatever. It just means that they didn't like that particular project. So throw them something else. I mean, some people *might* suck, but if you do have some sort of talent or ability to tell a story, you will hit it eventually. Maybe the editor has already seen four thousand haunted house stories that year, so they're not going to want the one you send them.

CD Are you a real witch?

SG Mmm hmm. I'm an eclectic witch, which is not Wiccan. I always consider Wiccans kind of like the Roman Catholics—there's all these rituals and things you have to do and it's a very strict kind of thing. For me, I just kind of take in ideas from everywhere. Just gathering ideas and trying to be connected to body, mind and soul and spirit and universe, and trying to remember that whatever we

set out into the universe comes back to us three times. And it's really hard to stay on top of that sometimes, because you get pessimistic and stuff when bad things happen. But yeah, I do practice witchcraft. Not heavy-duty, but I do like to wear my little trinkets and stuff, and I do believe that we have power over our lives and that we can control some aspects of our lives. But I also believe in free will, and I have never tried to cast a spell on someone. Attracting good luck is really what I'm all about.

CD Do you find that being a witch helps you as an author of horror, of dark things?

SG Yes. I think it does. I know a lot of people say there's no connection between horror and the occult and witches and all of that, but I think there is. I just had something on my message board on Horror World, someone saying that *Borrowed Flesh*, with the voodoo and the witchcraft, is giving them all a bad name and all this kind of stuff. And I wrote back, kind of haughtily, that it's fiction, man! (Laughs) If you want to read what I think about it in non-fiction, read *House Magic*. But fiction is fiction. I am a witch, but just because I'm a witch and know what that means and what real witches do, doesn't mean that I can't have fun making the character Vanessa a really nasty bitch-witch who is corrupted and does corrupting things. I mean, it's no fun if they're all good. (Laughs)

For fiction I think it's all about characters. And if the character is corrupted, then their witchcraft will be corrupted. With witchcraft, there's so many ways to come at it and so many levels to it. Like all new age things, it's all concepts and theories, and everyone has their own concepts and theories of what it means and there's no scientific evidence or data to say that any of the stuff is true or real or anything. So really, we can just bring to it what we want. So as far as I'm concerned there's no right way or wrong way to depict witchcraft. I know real witches would *like* to be shown as motherly, nurturing, nature type stuff. But nobody wants to read about that. (Laughs) That ain't a horror book.

CD Are you a hip-hop fan? I ask because your latest novel, *Borrowed Flesh*, just might be the first horror novel with rap in it.

SG Yes. I was trying to play around with said spells. And like in *Eternal Sunset*, whenever a werewolf character appeared it was always poetry, right? So I was trying to bring that writing into *Borrowed Flesh*. So I had spells, but then I thought, "Oh, I'll do hip-hop things too." It had poetry mixed in as well; this is just a different type. As for me personally, I actually don't have anything but Eminem! (Laughs) I love Eminem. My sixteen year-old son, who's upstairs, he's the one who got me into it. He's always listening to it and he dresses in the rapper gear. So that's why I have rap in *Borrowed Flesh*. The first rap horror book! (Laughs)

CD Your novel *House of Pain* is about a couple who kidnaps people and then tortures and murders them in their basement. When they're caught, the town destroys their house with a bulldozer. Was this inspired by the infamous case of Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka?

SG Yeah. Definitely. I guess it was the idea that these people could just be so heartless. Just nasty people. On some levels, before I knew about Karla, I sort of felt sorry for her and thought maybe she was sucked into all this. But now I realize that she's just an evil bitch. I thought that she was just an abused wife. She should be locked away. What's interesting is my fiancé is from St. Catherines, and when I first met him two years ago he took me around to all the places, to the vet where she worked and where the house was bulldozed and where one of the bodies was found. We weren't allowed down in that area of the creek or whatever, but he showed me where they found it and that was all really creepy. Like, I wish I'd met him before I wrote this book! I could have incorporated all this weirdness. But I didn't want *House of Pain* to be *too* much like that case; that's why I made it different people, and actually Paul and Karla are the dead people that come in. I had them killed for their crimes. (Laughs) Like they should have been. But yeah, that was fascinating to me. And another thing that I found interesting was how Karla had psychics come into the house because she kept hearing things or whatever. Like no kidding, you murdered a bunch of people in the basement!

CD What's next for you?

SG I'm still in limbo on my next Leisure contract. I only sent the proposal, and it got lost in the mail for like a month, so finally I e-mailed Don one just two weeks ago. So I don't know what my next Leisure book will be, but there is one. And it'll be written in the next nine months, because we talked about it at World Horror. And there is a *House of Pain* sequel coming, which will probably be out in two years. I have some stories coming out in some of these anthologies that should've already been out. There's *The Anthology of Absinthe*, some others. And *Tooth and Claw II*, which is put out by Lone Wolf. It's a CD and I did a little talking thing on it, but that was supposed to be out like a year ago and hasn't come yet. The novel that I pitched to Don is called *Mistress of the Dark*. The funny story behind that is, I did this interview...

CD *The Mississauga News*, right?

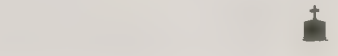
SG Yeah! (Laughs)

CD I was just about to ask, as a joke, when is *Mistress of the Dark* coming out? *[Editor's Note: The title was misquoted in the interview cited above.]*

SG (Laughs) This was someone who did *not* use a tape-recorder. So I'm going to call it *Mistress of the Dark* just as a joke. I don't know how the hell they got that, I don't know where that came from. I'm holding *Borrowed Flesh!* Yeah, they had a whole pile of things wrong there. He did it on the phone, I talked to him twice, and they got the age of my younger son wrong—he's twelve, not ten. They called Clive Barker, *Clyde* Barker. The guy called up and apologized—well, my fiancé called up and gave him shit, like "what the hell's this all about?" But I was just like, "Oh, man..." I was just telling myself that any press was good press, but people are going to be looking for this book that doesn't exist! So that's what I'm calling my next one, as a joke. Don knows about the screw-up, too.

CD Correct the mistake by just writing the damn book.

SG Right! (Laughs)



FIVE NOVELLAS

Blue November Storms by Brian Freeman **(Novella #14)** — A meteor shower is bringing change to the world, it's awakening the creatures of the forest from their quiet slumber.. and before long, five friends are going to find themselves trapped on the roof of their hunting cabin, with their numbers dwindling and supplies running low ..Trapped with no means of escape, the men will have to make some hard choices.. like who gets to live and who has to die.

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The Eyes of the Carp by T.M. Wright **(Novella #15)** — from author T.M. Wright, the man Kim Newman calls "The best ghost story writer alive today," and the author of the Stoker-nominated and critically acclaimed *Cold House, A Manhattan Ghosts Story, The Last Vampire, Sleepeasy,* and two dozen other novels of horror and dark fantasy published in fourteen languages.

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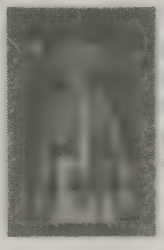

Retribution, Inc. by Geoff Cooper **(Novella #16)** — Retribution, Inc. is a hardcore band struggling on the club circuit, and their new guitar player, Ernie, has incredible skills and a secret: his hands bleed every time he plays. When they get a call from a prestigious venue, asking them to open for a national act, tension grows between the members of the band. Soon the anger turns to violence and before too long, there is blood on everyone's hands, and not all of it is Ernie's...

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Novella #17

The Colour Out of Darkness by John Pelan **(Novella #17)** — Lovecraft was right, though he only glimpsed a tiny sliver of the true horror that governs the secret history of the world. The truth is much, much worse as several young people are about to discover. The miracle drug "Essence" opens doors of perception hitherto undreamed of, but there's a heavy price to paid. The price is to belong body and soul to nameless horrors that were old when the earth was young. Nobody rides for free, and damn few get out alive…

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Novella #18

The Shell Collector by Christopher Golden **(Novella #18)** — Richie sees something nightmarish in the surf one day that he doesn't dare speak of for fear of what others might say. But he's having a hard time sleeping at night and soon a corpse is found that has been eaten at by sea creatures, including something large . . the corpse of Greta Wagner, a woman who had been buried two weeks earlier. Someone stole her corpse from the ground. And her grave won't be the only one disturbed...

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BINKY

Sephera Giron

THERE WAS THAT RAPPING NOISE AGAIN.

Frank, a beefy man of about fifty turned to me and pointed his grease-soaked finger towards the bathroom.

"Go see what it is."

I looked in the direction of the rapping and shook my head.

"No way, man."

Frank pushed me on the shoulder.

"Go on, kid. Go check it out."

God, how I hated the fact I was the youngest and the newest at this place. Sheesh. Even though I had been here nearly a year now, and more than proven my worth in the shop, these men still treated me like I was a little kid. Hey, I've got my papers. I'm twenty-nine years old. I've got my own kids, for Christ's sake. So stop treating me like an idiot.

But of course, in the hierarchy of life, I will never get off the hook until someone newer and younger gets hired. And that doesn't seem like it's gonna happen anytime soon.

In the meantime, that means that whenever anything happens that the other seven workers don't like, guess who has to deal with it?

And no one likes the rapping that has been coming from the bathroom for the past couple days.

'Cause there is nothing there.

I know this 'cause, of course, I was the one nominated to crawl through the air ducts, examine the pipes, snake all three toilets and flush the sink.

There was nothing to find.

"Watcha waiting for, kid?"

Henry sat with a smoke hanging out of his mouth, his work hat slightly askew, his face greasy with oil from the job he was working on. Man, I wish break time really meant break time. But all it means for me is fifteen minutes of foiling verbal barbs. It gets exhausting.

"I'm not going," I said firmly.

"Well, *sheeeiitt*...look at the rookie. Thinks he can jest sit around." Matt chuckled.

"I'm not a rookie anymore. And I'm tired of being your little puppet. I'm not here for your amusement. I'm here to do my job."

"New guy has a temper!" Frank grinned. "Watch out!"

I swallowed down my anger and remembered advice gleaned from a thousand talk shows.

They aren't worth my energy.

They're only teasing me because they lack something in their own lives.

I can get through this without snapping.

I hope.

The knocking noise was louder and more persistent.

"What the hell *is it?*" Henry said, pushing his hat back and smearing his face even more with his soiled fingers.

"I don't know."

You know, when this knocking noise business first started, I thought they were playing a trick on me. I thought they were testing me, setting me up for some kind of elaborate joke. I kept waiting for the punch line. The bucket of water on my head, or the roach in my sandwich. But nothing ever came of it.

After I had exhausted explanation after explanation for them, I could see in their eyes that this was no joke. These men, for some reason, were afraid of that noise.

"Go on, Jim. Go see what's going on."

"It's the same as it ever was..." I said.

"*Something* has to be making that goddamned racket." Frank said.

As if in reply, the knocking grew louder, more persistent. Not only that, but a cold breeze whooshed through the room and rattled the far door.

"What the hell was that?" Henry said. He stood up, rubbing his arms but the cold was gone already.

"Ghosts. I've been saying it for years. This damn place is haunted." Drew said, limping over to the table where we were sitting and picking apart our coffee cups.

"There ain't no ghosts." Frank said. He spat into his cup then tossed it into the nearby garbage with ease. He should have been a basketball player, not a welder. Well, maybe twenty or thirty years ago.

"Oh, there are ghosts. There are always ghosts. What do you think happens when you die?"

"You sure as hell don't go around haunting the can," Frank said. "Christ. Sissy boy talk. You starting to sound like young Jim here."

I bit my tongue. Let the old farts blather on. I was more concerned about the rattling and hissing on the other side of the door that was slamming repeatedly.

"Maybe we should get back to work. When the machines are on, we won't hear it," I said.

"We'll hear it. We'll always hear it. And feel it. Don't you feel it?" I swear that Drew must have been teethed on Vincent Price movies. I couldn't tell if he was just trying to tease us or if he was really bugging out.

"You ever read Stephen King?" Drew asked. "Member that story he wrote about the haunted bathroom. With Roger Daltrey?"

"So now we're living in a Stephen King story," I said. It sure as hell was beginning to feel like it, ghost or not. These guys were freaking me out.

Martin entered the room, puffing a smoke. He was in his thirties, going bald already, poor guy, and still never married, never had kids. Wonder if he ever will? I know he's sweet on that blonde waitress at the local pub but I don't know if he's ever gotten the balls up to ask her out.

"Binky's going nuts again," Martin said, blowing smoke out his nose.

"Binky?" I asked. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Yeah. We named the ghost, or whatever makes that noise, Binky a few years back."

"But why?"

"Who knows? Maybe it was something to do with back in the day, the noises weren't as loud. It was more like something out of the corner of your eye. Not obvious like now. One blink and you'd miss it. Sort of evolved into Binky."

"Sheesh…long way for that yarn," I sighed. "So tell me, since I'm the new guy on the totem pole, what is wrong with Binky? What does he want?"

Drew leaned back on his chair and sighed. Matt coughed. I could swear that I smelled conspiracy in the air. Maybe it had to do with the way Frank kept shooting glances at the others when he thought I wasn't looking. I've been the new guy at more then a few places in my life and I know that there's always something up. Some sort of initiation. And for some reason, initiation day never seems to be over for me. It's like grade nine every morning of my life. I'll be eighty and I'll still never fit in. I've learned that much in life.

"Who was Binky?"

"Near as we can tell…Might have something to do with that accident."

"Accident?"

"Long ago. There was a horrible fire. One of the welding torches flared up and jest kept flaring. The whole place went up like a fire bomb. Everyone got out. That is, except for one lone worker, trapped in the bathroom."

"Must have been taking a crap and couldn't get away."

"Jest like that Stephen King story…"

"No, not like that damn story. This was real. Look, you can still see the damage near the ceiling there. Jest above that new furnace."

I looked up and saw stains from smoke and water damage. The furnace always made me nervous. It was huge, and the roar of the flames sometimes seemed uncontained. I could imagine how the place caught on fire, if they had been shoveling piles of garbage and other shit into it. The belly of the beast, they had called it.

"So how come this is the first I've heard of your ghost," I said. My radar was beeping full blast now. Noises. Fires. Ghosts.

"You ain't been here long enough, I guess. No point in scaring the new guys," Frank said.

Christ. What a lame ass.

"How often does this happen?"

We all looked towards the bathroom. The rattling and thumping was insistent.

"About once a year or so. One time there was about three years when nothing happened. Of course that was because…"

"Because of no reason at all," Frank said hastily.

You could cut the silence that followed with a knife. Well, silence from the men. There was still a noise like a child having a temper tantrum coming from the bathroom.

"Ok. So you got a ghost. Why don't you call in an exorcist?" I said. Sure, why not? That's logical. Got rowdy spirits, call in the ghost busters!

"I think…I think things have been done over the years," Drew whispered. "But you know, when things don't work, you just piss the damn thing off even more."

"I'll remember that next time I'm taking a crap," I said.

Matt stood up.

"Break's over folks. Back to the grind."

Within minutes, the whole place was roaring with grinding and searing and banging and sawing. You couldn't hear Binky if you wanted to.

I put on my goggles and set to work on the frame that I had started before break. What the hell were those guys about now?

I knew, I just knew, that they were full of shit. Ghost my ass. Old coots like Frank and Drew and Matt don't believe in ghosts. Do they?

A ghost that raises hell in the bathroom once a year? For what? Why?

I sure as shit didn't believe in any damn ghost. It had to be plumbing problems or something in the systems. Maybe rats. Maybe some draft that got in and rattled the loose pipes. Maybe things went bonkers after the fire 'cause they didn't pay the contractor enough to do it right.

Spring is always a windy time of year. Maybe that's why the noise happens every year at this time.

But I know, I'm not superstitious. And I don't believe in ghosts. At least not today. I knew it was those clowns just razzing me, getting all serious like, as if they believed the noises were really from a ghost.

They were just setting me up.

And boy, did I have to take a leak.

I had two hours before I could take another scheduled break. In the meantime, if I wanted to piss, I had to use the can.

I put down my torch and took off my goggles and headed across the room to the toilets. I know they were watching me. But I'm no chicken shit. I could easily have pissed out the back door, but no, I'm going in there.

Ghosts my ass.

I was totally convinced now that they were just trying to creep me out. Whatever the noises were, it had nothing to do with a lame ass ghost named Binky!

As I neared the bathroom, I could almost feel the rattling and banging over the noise of machinery. I looked behind me, to see who was watching. I don't know if any of them were. They had lowered heads and masks, sparks flying all around from running metals through the machines.

I took a deep breath and entered the bathroom.

There was nothing in there. Just like all the other times.

The noise was there. Behind the walls, burbling through the pipes, vibrating beneath my feet.

I unsnapped my uniform and started to take a well-deserved piss. I stared at the urinal, almost angry at these guys. How the hell do they get off, trying to scare people like that? It was worse then high school.

The stall door slammed behind me and I turned to see who it was. I never had a chance though. A brilliant light flashed and my pupils burned. I screamed as pain throbbed through my eyes.

Welder's flash.

In the fucking bathroom?

I screamed, running into the stall, slamming it with my hands.

"Help me...Help me..." I cried but I knew no one would hear me through the noise. My hands fumbled along the stall, the walls, till they found the sink. Frantically I pulled the knobs, trying to get water out to flush my eyes. I put my hands under it and splashed my face repeatedly until I realized that the pain was getting worse. It was on my face, my hands. I could feel my hands weren't right. Something was wrong. Really wrong. There were holes in my hands, skin was sliding from my face. This wasn't water coming out of the tap.

I slammed into the walls, the stalls. Where was the door? Why couldn't I find the door?

After a while, I grew weary. I couldn't take this anymore. I was blind, my skin was falling off in clumps. Someone would have to come in soon to find me. To help me.

I lay down on the cool porcelain floor and cried myself to sleep.

When I woke, I was still blind, still in pain, still panicked.

There were voices around me. I flew up to my feet, hollering at them, banging whatever it was near me. It felt like pipes, like I was in the wall now. My fists smashed against dry wall, at foam, at plastic and god knows what. I was still blind, still in pain, still bleeding to death. The heat was incredible. I heard a roar behind me, something tearing away the flesh from my back. I screamed as my feet, my legs, my body grew hotter.

"Looks like Binky got another one," Frank said.

"Yup. Sure does." Drew said.

"It's a shame really. Just a kid."

"Gotta feed him the young ones, man. He don't like the old guys."

"Yeah. Bring in fresh new souls to fuel the fire."

"Shame. Jim had kids. Shoulda got someone who didn't have kids," Martin said.

"Accidents happen all the time. You know that. He knew that when he did his training. Dangerous job, this is..."

"So our jobs are safe for another year."

"Yep. For now." Drew said. "For now."

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JOHN PELAN

COLLECTING MODERN HORROR

When it rains, it bloody well tends to pour... and we have a plethora of titles to cover this month:

Let's open the mailbag... A newer collector moans "even with all of the affordable reprints hitting the marketplace, some authors like Clark Ashton Smith have just far too many books out there and are just too expensive to collect. Should I even bother, or should I just focus on the new guys?"

A great question; and speaking as a reader that has rediscovered a love for hard-SF I can attest that coming late to the party on the "new guys" can be just as frustrating and expensive as chasing after early Arkham House titles. Imagine the reader that decides today that a collection of first editions of Stephen Baxter, Peter F. Hamilton and Greg Egan is in order. Note that none of these worthies had been in book form prior to 1990 and all have books that will run over $500 in first edition!

Anyway, back to Smith... The volume referenced on our core list is *Rendezvous in Averoigne* from Arkham House. Recently reissued, this would seem to be the one volume that Arkham intends to keep in print and a worthy volume it is. Comparable to Robert E. Howard's *Skullface & Others* insofar as serving as both a "sampler" and a "best of," it shares the same strengths and weaknesses as the Howard book. There simply isn't enough room in one volume for all the Smith tales that merit preservation. What's here is essential, but there are still some fine stories left out.

START

Is it all the Smith you really need? In a word "no"; but this is coming from someone who has been a CAS fanatic since his early teens. There's a lot more that you should consider. For the economically-minded, the Gollancz Masterworks volume *Clark Ashton Smith: Emperor of Dreams* is a handsome trade paperback easily ordered online.

Of course Smith considered himself to be a poet first and foremost; so no Smith collection is complete without at least one volume of his poetry. If you don't want to spring for the first editions all of which start at over $200.00, you can content yourself with *The Last Oblivion: Best Fantastic Poems of Clark Ashton* from Hippocampus Press. A complete three volume set of all of his poetry is promised and if you like what you find in *The Last Oblivion*, you'll probably want to get a set.

One of the difficulties with collecting Smith in years past was that Arkham House jealously guarded their copyrights and works that had gone out-of-print were for all practical purposes unavailable to anyone. April Derleth has since changed this stance and been very accommodating with material that they have no plans for reprinting. One such book is Night Shade Books's *The Red World of Polaris* which contains the long-lost title story as well as *Marooned in Andromeda*, *A Captivity in Serpens*, and *The Ocean-World of Alioth* (a fragment). A slim volume, but if you enjoy Smith's SFnal tales, well worth your while.

A larger collection of Smith's SF is forthcoming from Darkside Press in late 2004 or early 2005 and will contain the bulk of his SF not available in *Rendezvous in Averoigne*. In the meantime, there are a couple of interesting "grab bag" collections being offered by Wildside Press. The first, *The Double Shadow* reprints what Smith considered his best stories as of 1932. It *is* a good collection, but for my money Smith wrote most of his best stories *after* the publication of this book. Another book forthcoming from Wildside, *The Maker of Gargoyles* offers an interesting mix of the commonplace and obscure...

Lastly, for some truly obscure material, Hippocampus offers two volumes of tales written by Smith in his teens. For most writers having their juvenilia collected can be a profound embarrassment and collections of such a bloody waste of paper. As a scholar, I'm interested in leafing through such material, but as a collector I have to raise my eyebrows when ephemera gets the limited edition sort of treatment. In most cases, juvenilia is no better or worse than you'd expect from a developing writer and generally not of much interest as far as literary merit. Smith and Howard Wandrei are both exceptions to this rule, in the case of Smith, the two volumes of this material from Hippocampus not only isn't half-bad, but could stand up pretty well with the average adventure piece from one of *Argosy's* lesser writers.

Rather than try to soak the readership for big bucks on what are after all first editions of a highly collected author, Hippocampus has released both books as modestly priced trade paperbacks. Elsewhere, Arkham has released an indispensable volume for those of a scholarly

bent: The first volume of Smith's letters under the able editorship of leading Smith scholar Scott Connors has appeared and is very interesting reading. The book reinforces my long-held opinion that while there were a lot of interesting individuals that wrote for *Weird Tales*, Clark Ashton Smith would have been my first choice to spend a evening out on the town with.

So, back to the original question... One *can* afford to get caught up on the bulk of Clark Ashton Smith's work without breaking the bank.

One author from our top-100 list that I haven't discussed is the late Hugh Cave. I'm sure that by this time you'll have read the sad news of his passing elsewhere, and I'm not going to attempt to convey how impressive his six+ decades as a writer were or what a neat guy he was. I only met Mr. Cave once, though we lived in the same state for several years and I regret that I didn't get to spend more time getting to know him.

The book on our list is the Fedogan & Bremer collection *Death Stalks the Night*. I must make a confession here... It's not Cave's best collection. Not even close. The book that I've left off the list due to pricing considerations is *Murgunstrumm & Other Stories*. It really is "The Best of Cave" and *Death Stalks the Night* is "The Second-best of Cave". The former is available as a trade paperback form Wildside Press, and I can only hope and pray that they saw fit to include the original Lee Brown Coye illustrations.

For keeping up with recent releases, there are several new (or newer) titles that you ought to consider. *Postcards*

(Carcosa House Edition)

from Terri by Tony Richards marks the welcome return to the supernatural tale by the author of *The Harvest Bride*. Tony Richards is one of the "lost generation" of British horror writers that were making their mark in the 1980s and just missed the recent "British Invasion" that included such notables as Simon Clark, Stephen Laws, and Tim Lebbon. Grab this book, this is a writer at the height of his powers and I expect we'll be seeing great things from him in the near future. As with all of Sarob's books, it's a micro-run of only of 250 copies and sure to disappear soon.

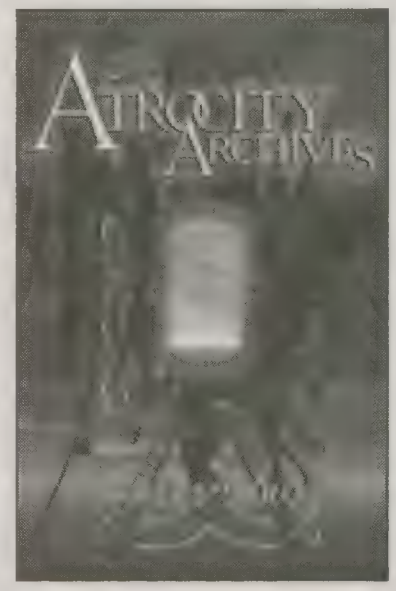
Also just out from Night Shade Books is their first of the collected Jorkens stories from Lord Dunsany. Definitely an important series and one that you don't want to miss; individually, I haven't placed any of the Jorkens books on our list, but taken as a whole they make a great addition to your collection..

Two modern novels definitely merit picking up: One shouldn't have to rely on this column to know that one should be buying anything with China Miéville's name on it, but in case anyone's been missing out, *The Iron Council* is one of the best books of the year and this time out the US edition is the true first. Call it "SF", call it "Fantasy", call it "Horror", call it whatever you please; just don't miss it.

Another great hybrid is *The Atrocity Archive* by Charles Stross from Golden Gryphon. Part Cthulhu Mythos, part SF, part espionage, *The Atrocity Archive* is most definitely something that belongs on your shelf. Fiction needs to provoke emotional responses; good *science* fiction should also make the reader think; *horror* fiction should rely on the former. When both criteria are met in works like Alastair Reynolds *Diamond Dogs*, some of Greg Egan's work and the old masters like Wandrei and Matheson, you've got a winner.

Jumping back to out list, I must add that the massive collection of Conan Doyle's supernatural fiction from Ash-Tree Press needs to be included in your collection if not on our list. (I must confess that I need to research the original publication dates to see if the majority of the stories are post-1900; I suspect that they are not). In any event, Doyle wrote a substantial body of work that can be classified as horror and *The Captain of The Pole-Star* is whopping big book at 460+ pages with an introduction by esteemed book reviewer Michael Dirda.

Unseemly though it may be to call attention to one of my own projects, there is no question but that G.G. Pendarves (Gladys Trenery) has earned her place on our list. She was one of the few *Weird Tales* authors that for the most part wrote what could be called traditional ghost stories, though always with an interesting twist. *Thing of Darkness* collects roughly two-thirds of her known output with a second volume planned at such a time as Mike Ashley and I have satisfied ourselves that there's nothing else to be discovered. That said, and considering that even a relatively modern author such as Cleve Cartmill has proven to have at least two previously uncatalogued tales, we're taking our time with the second volume.



Smoke 'em If You Got 'em

(On Horror as Wisdom, And the Radiant Dawn of Cody Goodfellow)

John Skipp

I'VE JUST STARTED READING modern horror again, after a ten-year absence (in which I wrote or read very little of it at all).

As I've said before: I just needed to get away. But having accomplished that mission, I am now re-descending into the depths that great horror fiction is uniquely positioned to explore.

And I've found some mighty fine things, so far, For example, there's Brian Keene's *The Rising*: an absolutely kick-ass, mega-page turning Zombie Reinvention novel. This sucker's just as flamboyantly violent, propulsively action-packed, and verbally straight-up on Delivering the Goods as one could possibly ask for.

I've also found some serious smarts and pleasure in the work of Gary A. Braunbeck (I was particularly moved by the excellent story, "Rose of Sharon"), and clutched my head in awe of what I've read so far from Norman Partridge's *The Man With The Barbed Wire Fists* (quite possibly the only man fit to walk by Joe R. Lansdale's side, on a gonzoid Texas night).

But for people who are regular readers of modern horror, none of this is exactly news. And if you aren't, there are lots of people who are more informed and up-to-the-minute than I am, I can tell ya that.

With all that being said: my big revelation at this year's World Horror Convention was a guy that nobody seems to have heard of.

The name is Cody Goodfellow.

And unless I am utterly fucking crazy, this guy has got to be one of the best virtually unknown horror writers on Earth.

And I wanna be really careful, here, not to overstate the case, start an anti-Cody backlash before he even gets out the gate.

So allow me to set up this framing device, and I'll try to explain to you what I mean.

When most people go to horror, they are not anticipating ideas. They are anticipating HORROR—as well they should be—cuz if the story doesn't deliver on *that*, then the reader's perfectly entitled to ask, "Well, what the fuck did I come here for?"

It's like porn without genitalia, or comedy without laughs, or religion without God.

It has failed at its task.

But once you've got your horror in place, then there's Everything Else. And the Everything Else is what makes the difference between pedestrian scarefests and bonafide Horror Classics.

Sometimes it's enthusiasm, like a Lucio Fulci film (or, indeed, most Italian horror). It's not long on the smarts, but boy, does it deliver on the horror goods. You wanna watch a woman vomit up her intestines? Watch THE GATES OF HELL. You wanna spend minutes watching a woman get slowly dragged toward the wood-splinter that will eventually pierce her eyeball in meticulous, fluid-squirting detail, on its way to her brain? Watch ZOMBIE. It's as simple as that.

There might not be an idea left in your head, by the end—it's stupography, pure and simple—but, FUCK! DID YOU SEE THAT SHIT? THAT WAS AMAZING!

This is horror, in its rawest, simplest form. Horror as a single-celled organism.

Beyond that, horror starts to accumulate layers. It starts to take on implications. As Skipp & Spector used to say (back when I was strategically two-headed): *horror is the fiction of consequences.* It's the fiction of worst-case scenarios, played out as deeply and richly as the author can dare to imagine.

Much quality horror derives its power from its emotional content. It's kinda like music or comedy, in that sense, because it gets its reaction instantaneously. You don't have to think about whether it got you or not. It either got you, or it didn't.

You *feel* it.

Then you think about what you felt.

Then—if you're so inclined—you think about what you thought.

In most horror fiction, intelligence is kind of like gravy. It's nice if you've got it; but if you don't, *there'd better be a whole lot of blood.* Or dread. Or at least some kind of something that is truly fucked up. Otherwise, you're pretty much thoroughly ripped off. (And, honestly? Horror audiences are pretty much thoroughly ripped off, most of the time.)

But when intelligence shows up—in the service of *enriching the horror*—that's when horror comes into its own. That's when it's about something more than just delivering a gross-out, or inducing a scare, or poking at a dread just so you can massage it later.

That's when horror gets serious.

That's when horror really matters, to me.

I'm not suggesting that horror needs to be smart, in order to be scary or fun. But if you wanna talk about *great* horror, you're probably talking smart.

And if you wanna talk about *truly great horror*, you might wanna throw in some wisdom, as well.

Which is to say: SMOKE 'EM IF YOU GOT 'EM.

Which brings me back to this Cody Goodfellow.

I just finished his first novel—*Radiant Dawn*—and am sixty-odd pages into the follow-up, *Ravenous Dusk*. Together, they comprise what has been described as an "epic Lovecraftian saga".

While not inaccurate, this doesn't even fucking *begin* to capture what I just read, and am reading still.

It's more like H.P. Lovecraft and Tom Clancy stopped by Thomas

Pynchon's house, on their way to perform some eco-terrorism with Edward Abbey and the Monkey-Wrench Gang, before hooking up with Robert Anton Wilson and Philip K. Dick to do some 'shrooms.

(When I told this to Cody, he said, "And if James Ellroy is breaking into their houses and stealing all their benzadrine and panties at the time, then that's the blurb I want on my tombstone".)

See? *That's* the kind of mind we're talking about here! Crazy as a bucketful of bloody puppet heads. And yet Cronenberg meticulous, every step of the way. (In fact, one reviewer—Stayci Layne Wilson—described him as "a cross between a less wordy Stephen King and a more coherent William Burroughs". Which just hits some more nails on the head.)

Let me see if I can even begin to describe the sprawling, apocalyptic puzzle-box cohesion that is this story. I don't want to give away specifics—because almost all of them are surprises—so let me go Joe Bob Briggs for a second, and list tantalizing ingredients.

You've got your *X-Files*-worthy conspiracy theories, complete with utterly convincing military and government interaction. You've got a man on the run, with a secret so berserkoid he can't even begin to understand it himself.

You've got monstrous eruptions of mutation and mayhem like the best of Clive Barker, or John Carpenter's THE THING.

All of this is delivered in a deadpan style that's both forensic and—at least to me—hilarious. In that sense, and several others, it reminds me of CATCH-22 (and I'm gonna try real hard not to invoke more greats. But I am making no promises.)

The thing is, reading Cody Goodfellow reminds me of all these other writers and artists, whenever I put down the book. But when I'm reading it, I'm not thinking of anyone else. Because he doesn't read like anyone else.

Which is to say: he is a fucking original.

Which is to say that he has digested his influences thoroughly. Read the stuff. Understood it immensely. And then surfed his own brainwaves to their logical conclusion.

He has integrated a staggering variety of quality components, and spit them out in a world-class way that I am utterly blown away by.

It kind of knocked me out to realize that both Cody's stuff and Brian Keene's *The Rising* had clearly taken some cues from *The Bridge* (which I now think is the best Skipp & Spector novel). But neither of them remotely cribbed in a Cliff's Notes sort of way. They've each got about as much to do with *The Bridge* as it had to do with my prime inspiration: John Brunner's science fiction classic, *The Sheep Look Up*.

In assessing the difference between Keene and Goodfellow, I'd have to say that Brian Keene took the Robert

Rodriguez path, while Cody Goodfellow steered more toward the Kubrick side of things. I love Rodriguez for his unbridled, playful enthusiasm and sheer velocity-driven entertainment value. I love Kubrick for his fierce, near-omnicient intelligence, attention to detail, and rigorous rapier wit.

Both are fiercely independent do-it-yourselfers. As are Cody and Keene.

As such, they are all Heroes of *the hard way*, so far as I'm concerned.

But my big concern, right now, is that nobody knows about Cody Goodfellow.

This cannot be allowed to continue.

Seriously, folks: I did not invoke one single name on that list of comparisons lightly. Not even Pynchon. I swear to God. *Radiant Dawn* and *Ravenous Dusk* brought *Gravity's Rainbow* to mind, as effortlessly as smelling apple spice cake makes me think of my Grammy Skibski. (Brigadeer General Pudding, anyone? You ain't seen the half of it!)

This is brilliant writing, which had to take years, and which was meant to be appreciated by brilliant writing lovers. I recommend it to horror people.

To science fiction people. To pop culture people. To literary people. To anyone who cares about words, and thoughts, and stories, and the human condition, and the future which is already upon us.

It's that good.

It's as good as it gets.

Smoke 'em if you got 'em, baby.

That's all I got to say...

† † †

ENDNOTES *ON THE DUSK THAT DEVOURS THE DAWN*

IT'S BEEN A COUPLE of months since I finished *Ravenous Dusk*; and God, do I wish I'd written this follow-up then.

But the images it burned in me have mercilessly hung around, and fucked with me savagely ever since. So I think I'll do alright.

So here's what you need to know about *Ravenous Dusk*, just in case you weren't sold already:

1) All the weird shit that happens in *Radiant Dawn*—and we're talking some profoundly weird shit—is just a pre-game warmup for the mind-boggling monster mayhem that follows.

You would have to hit Japanese films like AKIRA and TETSUO: THE IRON MAN to approximate the fuckoid conflagrations that transpire.

You'll agree, I suspect, that very few prose stylists in the horror fiction field have elicited tableaus on quite that scale. Much as I devoutly love *The Stand*, for example, the ultimate

Vegas showdown with the Finger of God kinda paled next to AKIRA's ultra-maximalist blowout.

You'd have to look at very early Clive Barker—or Mark Arnold's unbelievable novella "Pilgrams at the Cathedral" (the closer from Schow's *Silver Scream*)—to approximate the sheer extravaganza of language required to get that much fucking mayhem across. It's like watching a twelve-armed man juggle sixteen chainsaws, five atomic bombs, eight embryonic mutants that could tear your limbs off, and the *entire fucking world*, while listening to him dissect geopolitics like Noam Chomsky, whistle "Dixie", and stick a fork in your eye.

Craig Spector and I tried, with *The Bridge*, to go big with the canvas, convey the enormity of a world gone wild. And I think we did pretty good, all things considered.

But *holy mother of god*, does this shit get out of hand!

So if you thought *Radiant Dawn* didn't have enough horror in it—if it felt like a twelve-pack of *X-Files*, that was actually going somewhere terrible, but hadn't quite gotten there yet—*hold on to your hats, motherfuckers!* Cuz this baby goes hog-wild, and then so far beyond that even the hogs sit back and just stare in glaze-eyed wonder.

2) Cody Goodfellow doesn't write like regular writers.

Like me, for example. I'm a white-space-on-the-page freak. I like my prose lean. I like the words to whip by.

Cody Goodfellow, on the other hand, writes in great big glacial slabs. His paragraphs are so long and dense that you'd have to cut 'em with a fucking laser, if you could cut 'em at all. (To hear him tell it, he used to be even worse: I try to imagine this epic horror tale told in a single paragraph, like Kerouac and Cronenberg gene-splicing themselves into evolutionary hell.)

It was rare that I could make it through more than two chapters without having to pause—for a half-hour, at least—before picking the book in question back up, and wading in again.

That being said: I couldn't wait to get back. I just had to assimilate a whole lot of data.

3) Along the same lines: this is a pair of books that clearly did its homework. And I was unsurprised to discover that Mr. Goodfellow bent the ear of an actual FBI guy, in the course of writing this meticulous mega-tome.

The agent in question—whom Cody dubs "Deep Navel"—patiently listened while young Goodfellow laid out the most crazy-assed supranatural terrorist scenarios imaginable, and described in ridiculously-potent detail what the government's response would be.

The results are so rich in detail and plausibility that thrill-seeking civilians may find themselves glazing over, now and then.

On the other hand, horror freaks who also groove on spy books, conspiracy theories, and military intelligence procedurals will find themselves nodding their heads almost constantly (and doubtlessly thinking, "*Fuck!* Why didn't I think of that?").

And the depth doesn't just come from book-learnin', or finding an "inside connection".

4) Cody Goodfellow understands people.

Horror is a genre that thrives on outsiders; and very often, its protagonists are precisely that. But the litany of prototypical "horror outsiders" has gotten almost preposterously pat.

That said: I defy you to find me a bunch of protagonists as fully, functionally, believably weird as Sgt. Zane Storch, Nurse Stella Orozco, or Special Agent Martin Cundieffe.

They are so outside—and so *completely themselves*—that I am happily unable to compare them to anybody else.

(And don't even get me *started* on the dreaded Spike Team Texas, or the dozens of other phenomenal characters that populate these books.)

5) There is also--I don't know how else to put this--one of the god-damndest I-can't-believe-I'm-reading-this sex scenes in the history of the written word. (And this in a series that hasn't flashed so much as one nipple of titillation in the previous 500-some pages.)

6) The only reason I don't just go ahead and say "*masterpiece!*" is this:

There is a battle scene, midway into *Ravenous Dusk*, where the action gets so dense and conflagraphic that I actually couldn't figure out what the fuck was going on. It wasn't till a chapter later that I understood what happened. And once I understood, it was cool.

So, essentially—in the course of this astounding juggling act—he *dropped exactly one bomb*. Which ain't much, all things considered.

So, in comparison with a work like Alan Moore's *Watchmen*—in which *not one single ball is ever dropped*—I've gotta take Cody Goodfellow's epic *exactly one peg down* from genuine flawless masterpiece status.

That being said: it's still fucking amazing.

And suggests mucho brilliance yet to come.

Bottom line: I can't remember the last time I was this knocked out by a writer. Much less an unknown writer.

If you don't read these books, you are out of your head.

Radiant Dawn. Ravenous Dusk.

You heard it here first.

Unbelievable greatness.

Raising the bar, from here on out.

(These books were published by Perilous Press: an indie, formed entirely around Mr. Goodfellow's work. Insofar as I can tell, the only reason you folks don't already know about 'em is that *they didn't know anybody on the horror scene.*)

(Thank God we took care of that!)

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Burning Names

Cody Goodfellow

When they needed to score and all their old marks were played out, Roshawn and Aida went shoulder-fishing at the County Clerk's. Aida was too tweaked to keep the numbers straight and stop picking at her face so Roshawn fished alone. Aida was better with people, better at stealing, better at all of it, until she got like this.

An old man caught Roshawn looking on with her lips still moving as she read his social off his form request. She ducked out before he could alert the security guard, streaked across the lot and into the dent-resistant side of a new Volvo wagon with kids and groceries in the back and a mom in a soccer coach outfit, and a fancy white leather purse, more expensive than all the things anyone had ever bought for her in her life, put together.

It was the purse that Roshawn studied as she jumped back from the coasting Swedish shuttle, not the screaming kids or the oblivious mom. It was the purse, which was sitting on the roof. She jogged after the car as it sped up and, to her delight, turned down the side street where she'd left Aida in her shitbox Fiero. She saw the driver's head turn and notice Roshawn in her mirror, dropped back so she wouldn't stop. *Go on, bitch, don't worry about me, go back to La Mesa.*

She broke into a run, rounded the corner and skidded to a stop as twenties blew by her on the dank afternoon breeze.

Aida danced down the middle of the street, snatching bills out of the air and laughing. "D'you believe this? You say praying don't work, then what's this shit?" Swinging from one skinny claw, the purse.

Aida smoked cigarettes like she was sucking venom out of a snakebite as she counted bills, "Three C's and change," but she counted again. "Let's go see Hector."

Roshawn's nerves danced, sparks of autonomic joy sending the Fiero bouncing across the lanes on the eastbound 8. "The cards be trash by the time we get Hector out of bed," Roshawn said. "Use your head, that shit makes you so stupid. We max 'em out with a quickness and blow town. That was the plan if we got a fat one…"

"This lady's on the vapors, she lose her head, if it's not tied on. We fry her now, she lock up the castle and call out the feds. She too hot now, but she on the vapors, like I said. She cancel these, get new ones in the mail. We don't need her cards. We've got *her*. We ghost her, and ride her to the next level."

Roshawn and Aida had burned more people than they could hope to count, but in short, sharp shocks. Card dips, picked pockets, mail shakedowns, small schemes Roshawn learned from Aida. They bought numbers and papers from the Trashman, who prowled the rich condo dumpsters. But Aida wanted to slow-burn this bitch, something they'd talked about, but never got the nerve to do.

"We could bleed her so long, we be livin' her life before she saw we took it."

Roshawn pouted, but she turned away from the mall.

Poor Tennessee Navy trash, stranded in San Diego on a dishonorable discharge, Roshawn's family had to make do in the ghetto. Roshawn had to learn to pass for black, though she was abysmally white, with the close hazel eyes, ash-blond hair and awful dentition of the Scotch-Irish mountainfolk who paid for passage to America as indentured servants before slaves were imported from Africa. Mimicry was survival for as long as she could remember, but Aida showed her how to make a living at it.

Where Aida herself came from, Roshawn had learned little that stayed the same from one telling to the next, and she was smart enough to see how Aida's lessons gave the lie to it all. *Know what your mark knows, let them see you're part of their world, and nothing more.*

When they first met, Aida's own stories of hardship as a military brat, of abuse at the hands of men, rang true and bonded Roshawn to her. Overjoyed to find she didn't have to choose the lesser of masculine evils, thrilled to find someone she thought understood her, she didn't notice for a long time how much Aida had changed her.

In her more lucid moments, Roshawn guessed that the essential Aida must be whatever she was slowly changing Roshawn into, but she remained frozen, fascinated. Becoming *anything* was better than what she'd been. She learned how to play men and women, straight, solid types who could draw cash on a credit card without getting the stink-eye from the manager. In between, she learned how to be hard and blank, to partake of the empty rituals of addiction without hope of pleasure, to endure the ugliest underside of life without pain or fear. It was a better life than she could have made, on her own.

They picked up three eight-balls of crank from Hector, but Aida swept through into the bedroom, stripping off her clothes, and crashed on the waterbed. Roshawn sank in beside her, as close as she dared, wary of Aida's feverish glow. The heat redoubled and cooked the sweat out of her naked body. Roshawn longed to touch her, but feared waking her up. This wasn't normal, this kind of sleep, and she feared breaking it.

She lowered her head to the hollow between Aida's tiny breasts and lapped at the rivulets of sweat, tasting the smoke and ammonia and ether of crystal meth, and something else she had always figured was the true essence of Aida, because she could not guess what else it might be. For a minute, she thought she knew Aida, and was happy.

Roshawn didn't know how long Aida had been sleeping with the driver's license under her pillow. She changed the sheets whenever they stole new ones, because neither of them liked to do laundry.

It was no kind of betrayal that Roshawn could explain, but it derailed her cleaning binge and got her taking things apart, and that was how she found the books.

"What's all this shit?" she barked, when Aida breezed in from shopping.

Aida, confused, got defensive about the flock of gossamer shopping bags that seemed to float around her like balloons. Before Aida could stroke her, Roshawn charged her with the fattest of the books, something called the *Tibetan Book Of The Dead*. "What're you *reading* for? Why are you keeping shit from me?"

Aida took the book and pocketed the license. "Haven't you ever thought about your soul?"

Roshawn went slack. She hadn't even looked inside them. Books were for learning how to do things, and if the books were a secret, then what was she learning?

"These souls we got now, they pretty beat-up, Ro."

Roshawn looked into Aida's eyes, lost in the way the golden mandalas in her irises seemed to turn when she operated. "We could stop…"

"We'd still be us, wouldn't we? Still damned, just starving, too."

Why did *she* feel like the one who was hiding something? "We could change…"

Aida smirked, mute shorthand for how dumb Roshawn was. "Ain't you heard of predestination? God knows everything, from the beginning to how it's gonna turn out. So no matter what you do, if your name's not in the book, you never get saved. God made you, He knows you can't change."

Roshawn tried the smirk, but only felt dumber. "Where'd you get all this shit?"

"Daddy was a righteous Calvinist. After a good Sunday-go-to-meetin' beatin', he used to tell me about the Elect—that's the saved ones. Since God knew how Daddy'd turn out in the end, he could do what he did to me, and still go to judgment with a clean conscience. This is their world, Ro. We just live here."

Roshawn snorted a line to keep from laughing. "So you're one of the Elect?"

"Hell no. Nothing in the Lord's big book about Daddy knocking up a whore in the Philippines who could track him down in the States. Daddy used to say I had no soul, anyhow. They do give you a lift, though, knowing you judged and damned, whatever you do. Everything's free, you know?"

"No judgment you need to fear but mine, girl." Roshawn tried to look as brave as the words sounded.

Aida's long acrylic nails tickled the tender scalp of Roshawn's cornrow braids. "So *I* belong to *you*, now?"

Later, when Aida showed her the new ID with her picture and the mark's name, she was too stoned in love to care. Aida had only to look at her that way, that said she knew who and what Roshawn really was, and could bear to keep looking, though she would never, ever tell what she saw.

† † †

A week later came the cards. A Titanium Visa, Platinum American Express and, just for laughs, a Discover. They moved into a decent one-bedroom condo and bought new furniture: solid modern black lacquered oak, not like the flimsy particle-board Ikea shit that fell apart every time they had a fight.

And fight they did, as soon as the furniture was delivered. Roshawn was edgy, tweaking for two days, and Aida, she suddenly realized, hadn't touched any in a week, hadn't even lit a cigarette. They had it out until Roshawn's anger, under Aida's careful husbandry, mutated into lust.

"Why'd you have to tear my clothes?" Aida asked, after.

"To get at you," Roshawn answered, but the lie had no legs. These clothes made her mad, these feminine, pastel floral prints, soccer-mom togs. Aida dressed like the mark, shopped in the same stores, cutting the game too close. She didn't care if Roshawn didn't like it, wanted her not to. Roshawn could steal, she could lie, she could pass for a Wal-Martian credit-slave, but Aida could put on quality with or without the clothes. If Roshawn could get her hands around the gland or ghost that could enable Aida to leave her behind, she would gleefully rip it out.

"D'you want to go out?"

"No," Roshawn moaned.

"Well, I do." Aida squirmed out from under her, skinned into fresh clothes and was gone.

Roshawn made herself look at the books. It wasn't even that they were hidden. Books, written words in any configuration, made her feel stupid and mean.

They were about souls, but not like Aida talked about. A couple of them were religious stuff, about good works and sin and prayer and salvation, but these were outnumbered and outweighed by the others—science books, the kind Roshawn hated most. A head-shrinker book said the soul was an illusion, but a very real one, while another book by a brain-mechanic said that the soul was an energy field made by the brain and DNA, and a third was full of poetry about the soul and its seat in the heart, the eyes and the brain.

Roshawn chopped out rails and snorted until her eyes teared up and she forgot most of what she'd read.

† † †

She thought Aida was going to clubs, or maybe to Hector's, because she hadn't done her share of the crank. Whatever she was doing—and in their time, she had caught Aida doing *everything*—Roshawn could forgive, but what she saw when she followed her one night, she couldn't even comprehend.

Aida left her Fiero at the curb and walked down another block to a Volvo station wagon with Avis plate frames. Roshawn huddled behind a bush until the silver wagon's frosty high-beams died away, then ran back to the apartment for the spare keys to the Fiero.

She wasn't hard to catch. She drove so slow she might have been on the links, looking for a lost golf ball. Roshawn dropped back. The Volvo only went another few blocks to the outlet mall, where Aida parked in the front of the enormous, empty lot and just sat there. For an hour.

Roshawn shivered and scratched, sure Aida had spotted her, wondering why she didn't just come over and call her on it. *Because she can't*, came an unaccustomed rational judgment. *Because she's not Aida, right now—*

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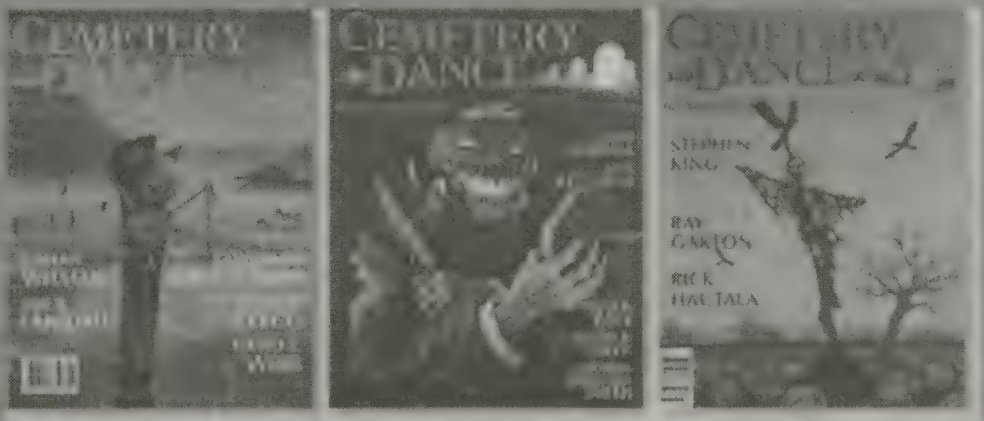

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When the Volvo finally pulled out, Roshawn had almost fallen asleep. Her feet prickled with oxygen-starvation, the crank stealing all the blood from her extremities, but she made the little shitbox car go into gear and slipped in behind the crawling wagon.

She followed it to the park next, where it stopped beside the soccer field for another hour. Roshawn resisted charging the car and finding out what the fuck was going on, but she felt the old numbness washing over it all, every bad or inexplicable thing in her life getting cemented over so it seemed normal.

She loved Aida. She'd never told her, and never would, but Aida knew it, used it, wrung it dry. She'd never been this close to anyone, though, and wasn't about to fuck it up like everything else. When the Volvo started up again and pulled out into the street, Roshawn forced herself to turn around and go back to the apartment. Whenever she got home, they would figure out what was what.

Lying in wait in the dark, Roshawn snapped into action when the arc-sodium lamplight from outside spilled in the open door. She'd tossed the condo, found more books, more things she never knew Aida had bought. She took the book in her hand—on making mummies, of all fucking crazy things, not the heaviest, but slim and wide, lots of pictures—and pulled a muscle in her shoulder throwing it at the silhouette in the doorway.

The book met flesh with a pulpy crack and a muffled yelp that raised goosebumps of joy on Roshawn's skin before she realized she didn't recognize her victim's voice.

"What the fuck?" Aida shouted and flicked on the lights. She stood behind the woman Roshawn had hit—the mark. She wore a sea-foam green leotard and a matching wrap that looked like very expensive smoke. Her hands were tied behind her back with nylon rope, and duct tape covered her mouth. Her eyes were red and streaming, and her nose was crushed to the right and just starting to bleed.

"What's going on, Aida? What the fuck, girl—"

"Time to take it to the next level, Ro." Aida led the crying woman to the dining room and sat her on one of the new chrome and black leather barstools. "She can't help us anymore, like she is."

"What do you want with her?"

Aida flanked her into a corner of the room so she couldn't see the woman, could see nothing but Aida's hungry eyes. "It's no good anymore, Ro. This life... it's all make-believe, you know? We keep using her cards, in a couple months, they going to catch on, and we have to run, and start all over. And you and me both got bench warrants, fucking cops know us both from all fucking day, girl. I'm sick of this shitty deal, Ro. I want what she got."

Aida backed up to the woman, beckoning Roshawn closer. She ran her fingers through the woman's sweat-plastered hair. Her tongue flicked out and lapped a bead of blood from the end of her broken nose, a tear from her rolling, popping eyes.

Roshawn wanted to vomit fire. "Too far, Aida, this is too far, way fucking past too far..."

Aida jerked her back by her braids. Cranked as she was, Roshawn was fast, but Aida paralyzed her with a gaze, stopping just Roshawn short of smashing her forehead. In the air before her eyes hung that promise, that knowledge, that Roshawn hungered for. That look that told her she might just be more than a throwaway drug casualty, more than a shitty little thief, and Roshawn knew, by now, that the look was its own reward, a tool and no more, but still she couldn't look away.

"We can use her body," Aida whispered. "We burn this place up with her in it, and get gone, and they think she's me. We go on, like born again, and all that shit you been trying to forget, you just shed it like old skin. Just roll it off you and start over, and we can be together, baby..."

Roshawn gave this a moment. "Bitch, you so stupid. You watch them detective shows, same as me. They always get dumbfucks that play that. They got DNA, no matter how burned up she is, they still won't take her for me, and you? You a *mutt*, Aida. She a purebred."

"I can fix it," Aida said, beaming, so proud. "Been fixing it. DNA is just records. Just shit on computers. It's fixed."

"And don't we need *two* bodies?"

"Yeah, we do." Aida went behind the bar and chopped out some rocks on the beveled, mirrored top. "We'll go back out and get yours, right after, I got it lined up..." Aida bent and snorted manfully of the fat rails on the bar. Roshawn came up behind her, and the rich bitch was watching, so she ran her hands over Aida, feeling electricity rushing through her, and she wanted to taste it, to go down on Aida right now and show the bitch who she belonged to. But Aida twisted away and slipped her the straw.

Roshawn knew this was not a time to ponder the situation. It was time to be a bullet from a gun, a kamikaze pilot, until it was all done. She sucked up a line and switched nostrils for the next, slaloming through four more before sitting back to savor the burn.

Aida was tying the woman to the barstool with more rope, and getting books out and setting them on the bar, and opening a brand new toolbox full of shiny things. Aida moved so fast she blurred into a green shimmering comet, and Roshawn realized she must be wearing the same green leotard as their hostage, the Volvo lady who'd forget her head if it wasn't tied on—

Roshawn tried to get up, but slopped bonelessly onto the sea foam green Stainmaster carpet.

"Are we going out, or not?" she tried to ask, but the rug muffled her words as she blacked out.

She dreamed that she saw part of what happened next.

Aida sat down before the woman, but really, she just appeared, because she'd been a blur, and all the books before her, and so many tools, for ingesting drugs she'd never imagined existed, for doing things to people that even she had never been subjected to.

Aida shouted in the woman's face, but Roshawn couldn't hear. The woman screamed and sobbed back until Aida shrugged and rocked back on the barstool.

When Aida did the drugs and then picked up the other tools, the woman in the chair suddenly came to life, her arms scissoring the rope, the tape slipping away, but she did not try to escape, nor did Aida restrain her. What she saw was not their physical bodies, which hung motionless behind them like shadows of candlelight.

Aida stormed the mark with her tools. She scooped out both eyes with a peculiar notched spoon, and swallowed them

like oysters. She seemed to meditate on their digestion for a moment, then, finding something wanting, dug deeper.

The fluttering shadows of the rich bitch mirrored Aida's movements so that they seemed to eat each other in a dead heat, the clatter and scrape of their feasting competing with the slurp and pop of stolen morsels fitting into place in their new bodies, only to be torn away and eaten again.

Roshawn tried to say or do something to stop it, but it just went on and on and then Aida ordered her to be a dog, and the woman echoed her command, and Roshawn was a dog, and rolled over and thanked Aida for letting her go to sleep.

And she woke up in the middle of the hands-down best trip she'd ever had in her whole life, because the whole room was wreathed in dancing flames.

She realized with a start that she was on the waterbed, and she called for Aida to see if she could see it too, but her voice was so small before the roar of the vision. Roshawn reached out and tried to grab one of the blue-gold snakes slithering across the headboard of their week-old bed. Her hand went right through it, but her hand jerked back and slapped her face and the pain had so much to tell her about how hot, how very real, the fire was, that she could only scream as the fire got closer.

The flames raced up the canopy like spiders. Burning shreds of lace fell on her and sent her into fresh spasms of screaming, but now she leapt off the bed and bolted for the door, clawing the cobwebs off her face and trying to remember where the front door was.

The living room proved more than she could handle. The woman still sat on the barstool, still hog-tied, but she must have been splashed with gasoline, for all the fire pouring out of her. She sat upright like a martyr, with no face and the light of her burning pouring out from her hollowed skull and cracked ribcage. Roshawn could only conclude that Aida had been unable, as always, to decide what she wanted or needed, and so took it all.

Now the novelty value of the fire had completely worn off, and Roshawn dove out the window and into the tasteful decorative landscaping, and only now did someone see fit to hit a fire alarm. The sad honk of the alarm brought sleepwalking adults and excited children out into the common area, but Roshawn was already gone, palming Aida's spare key to the Fiero under the bumper and peeling out for the suburbs.

She got three blocks away before the shock of it hit her, before what happened and what it meant blinded her with tears. She pulled over and gathered herself, slotting the new developments into her life. But she was not done.

She almost didn't find it. The cul-de-sacs and twisting, junior-high poetry street names lulled her into a blind, slow-motion panic. The identical buff-stucco ranch tract houses rolled by on both sides like teeth in a jaw, only the colors and makes of the SUV's and European sedans in the driveways marking any individuality. Roshawn was sure she was going in circles, mistrusting the hazy memory of the address, of the route traced in darkness, and then she saw it. The silver Volvo out front, but it might have been any Volvo, but for the fancy white leather purse on the roof.

Roshawn sat and looked at the purse, and suddenly had no idea what to do. Maybe if she had a line, if someone smarter was there to tell her what to do. If Aida—

The front door opened and they came out in their Sunday best. The two youngest boys chased each other around the Volvo until their older sister collared them, and Dad, sandy-hair and tanned like a movie star, with an expensive sweater on even though it was summer, told them to quit it or no brunch after church. Roshawn started to get out. Maybe she should tell them what happened, and go, before the cops came. Maybe she should just go—

And then she came out. She wore a smart, fashionably pious blue dress that Roshawn had seen Aida buy at Nordstrom's. The children fell silent and got in the car as their mother smiled at the beauty of the morning, took her purse off the roof, and then fixed her gaze on Roshawn.

Roshawn's hand went numb on the latch, slipped away. The woman's eyes skewered her, though she couldn't meet them for more than an instant. When only the two of them could see each other, the woman's face went away, and she could see the real Aida. The mark had given Aida as good as she'd gotten, and what was growing back in its place was anything but flesh. It only took that long for those eyes to tell her exactly what she was, and send her on her way.

Roshawn followed the smoke back. The whole alley was choked with fire trucks and ambulances, but they were already packing up. Nobody noticed her as she stumbled over the hoses and cables and the odd knot of die-hard fire-watchers to stand in the carport across from her apartment building.

The fire gutted their apartment, and ate most of one upstairs unit before they put it out. The firemen tramped around the upper floor, chopping down pockets of smoke, but there was nothing left to save. Not that any of it had belonged to her, anyway.

Something rustled in the shadowy carport behind her. The plastic tarp covering a car crumpled and something breathed charcoal and hot dog vomit on her neck.

"All she had to do," Aida's voice said, "was ask."

Roshawn jumped and bit her lip. Policemen across the alley stood with the manager, who pointed at the burned-out ruin and mouthed, *junkies*.

"Your stupid friend hurt me so, and still almost fucked it up. I would've traded her… All she had to do was ask."

The police said there were no bodies, or maybe they said *nobodies*.

"What are you…?" Roshawn whispered. She turned and looked, and the more she looked, the more she saw Aida, and not an eyeless apparition of glowing bone embers and melted spandex dripping on the concrete. She looked no worse, now, than plastic surgery disasters Roshawn had seen in tabloids, and she kept changing. She didn't have to work at it like Aida had, because her kind just got whatever they wanted. *The Elect*—

"I'm myself, ain't I?" said the mark. "And I guess you're mine."

Roshawn bit back a scream that would have brought all the police for miles. Empty sockets worked and blew bubbles that clouded and became Aida's eyes. "Come on, Ro," she said. "Let's go shopping."

Our Ladies of Darkness

A Conversation with

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

guest installment by Hank Wagner

Born September 15, 1942 in Berkeley, California, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro attended Berkeley schools through high school then spent three years at San Francisco State College (now University).

A professional writer since the late nineteen sixties, Yarbro has worked in a wide variety of genres, from science fiction to westerns, from young adult adventure to historical horror. She has sold over seventy books, and penned more than sixty works of short fiction; she's also written dozens of essays and reviews. Quite prolific, the author maintains a six-hour-a-day, six-days-a-week-at-the-keyboard schedule except when traveling. Five days a week she spends three to four hours doing research.

Yarbro is famous for her series of historical novels featuring the Comte de Saint-Germain, who just happens to be a vampire. Debuting with *Hotel Transylvania* in 1976, the series has grown to seventeen volumes as of this writing (the latest installment, *Dark of the Sun*, was recently published). At present some 4000 years old, Germain has a unique perspective on the behavior of the humans he has encountered over the centuries, a perspective that favorably distinguishes Yarbro's work from the current glut of uninspired vampire fiction.

Speaking with Yarbro, one perceives a passion for learning and history. One tangible expression of these passions is her large reference library. Composed of books on a wide range of subjects, it's constantly expanding, reflecting her thirst for knowledge and her pursuit of story ideas. Aside from writing, she makes maps, reads tarot cards and palms, and composes music. Over the years she has studied seven different instruments, voice, and musical theory: composition, voice, and piano have continued to be active interests for her.

CD Do you think your writing has had an impact on the horror genre?

CQY I'm told it has, and on my good days, I suppose that's true. I do think I may have pushed back the boundaries on the field and upped the level of ambiguity acceptable in a story, although in many ways that's a rediscovery, something I picked up from reading Hoffmann, James (M.R. and Henry), and Blackwood. We all crossbreed, which is why I don't read horror while I'm writing horror.

CD Do you have a sense of distance from your own work?

CQY After a decade or more, sometimes I do. Never before then, and sometimes not after. For me, a piece of a work succeeds when the whole of the original vision comes back to me upon reading. Most of the time, that experience lasts for a passage or a paragraph, although in *Path of the Eclipse* there is one page that still—more than 20 years after putting the words on paper— brings back the initial vision at almost full force. I doubt if it has that impact on anyone else, but, for me, that one page is the most fully realized bit of the book. On the other hand, I am well aware that my work isn't about me—that's called autobiography— but about the characters, and they come first. It's their story, so in that sense, I am distanced from the get-go, as I think it is the job of a storyteller to be: I care about the situations my characters are in, but it is my intention that they — the characters —experience the circumstances, and deal with it in their own ways, not as I would do. In a character as well-established as Saint-Germain, this is easier to do than any character who has only one book to live in, but I still feel the obligation to try to let the story be perceived through the characters' eyes, not my own, and that imposes a distance all its own.

CD Did you ever consider writing more mainstream fiction, or do you naturally gravitate towards the horrific and fantastic?

CQY I tend not to put labels on what I do except after the fact: the exception is Saint-Germain, which I have called historical horror from the beginning. I have always liked scary stories and so it's probably not surprising that I have gravitated in that direction, no matter what it's called—although I'm not fond of the label "dark fantasy," which sounds apologetic to me.

CD Can you provide a little personal background/history? How, if at all, have your origins colored your writing?

CQY Actually, I live in my hometown: Berkeley, California, the older daughter of a Finnish father and an Italian mother. Yes, I know the jokes about this place, and often I agree. Berkeley can be exasperating and peculiar but it is never boring. As to how it has colored my writing, it's a little hard to say, since I can't "un-have" my life here in exchange for another to which to compare it. But I think that living in such an intellectually stimulating place has made it easier to ask questions that are not just in the mainstream. And for a left-leaning Democrat like me, the Bay Area is a wonderful place to live.

CD Can you describe a typical workday?

CQY I usually start to work around nine, do the e-mail, and then on to work. I do this five and sometimes six days a week. In the last

ten percent of a book, it goes seven days a week and usually eight instead of six hours a day. I have been known to stay up all night to finish a book. I also do a couple hours of research every day, planning a book ahead. When I travel for more than two days my laptop goes with me and I try to put in two to three hours a day at the machine.

CD Over the years, you've not limited yourself to one form or another, publishing numerous novels, short stories, and essays. What form do you prefer to work in, short story, novella, novel?

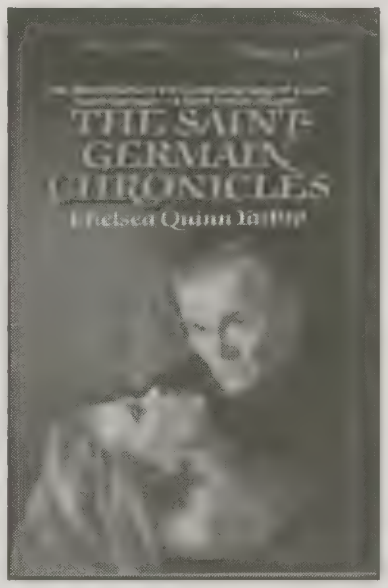
CQY Novels are easiest to do, because they have the greater range and I can explore possibilities that the short story cannot accommodate. Doing novels, I tend to turn out between five and six finished pages a day once they get moving. In short stories, I'm lucky to get three finished pages a day.

CD Which of your works would you recommend to someone who has never read any of your fiction?

CQY I'm the worst person to ask about that, since I have very little perspective on anything I've written in the last twenty years. I have an abiding fondness for *Ariosto*, but it is out-of -print, and for a stand-alone scary story, I like "A Mortal Glamor," which is also o-p. I'd recommend anyone wanting to start on my stuff talk to one of my long-time readers for a list of suggestions; the information provided would be much more useful.

CD Besides your own work, you've also collaborated with other writers. What's been your experience with collaboration?

CQY Collaboration can easily become "colloboration," when one partner mashes the other into the ground. In general I try to avoid collaboration for fear of "colloboration." Working with Bill Fawcett is the exception, because once we agree on the story line, he leaves me alone to do the first draft. He does the second, and I do a polish to smoodge the style. That kind of collaboration I like. But for the most part, I am not a good collaborator, since once the characters establish themselves, for me there is almost no wiggle room,



and that can be very problematic when a collaborator has a different vision than I do.

CD What's the hardest effect to achieve in a horror novel?

CQY I hope to give the readers a rattling good scary story, one that evokes all manner of unease, and out of it—hopefully—compassion. But in terms of reader reaction, it is all a crapshoot.

CD What do your family and friends think of your profession?

CQY Most of my friends are supportive of what I do. Most of my family is still somewhat bewildered,

if they pay any attention to it at all; the general opinion among my relatives seems to be that this is a fifty-five year phase I'm going through—I started writing stories as a little kid— and eventually I'll do something adult. They aren't nasty about it in general (although two of my born-again cousins are downright hostile) but they tend to regard my work as they might regard a performing seal. But then again, few of my relatives are readers.

CD What's the most important ingredient to a written work?

CQY From my point of view, no characters = no story. Who the characters *are* makes the plot. I also think environment functions as a tertiary character, and that all action, to be convincing, must evolve from character.

CD Is writing intuitive? Is it an innate talent, or can it be taught?

CQY If someone has talent, they can learn the craft and use it for more skillful storytelling than without. But in fiction writing, if you aren't born with it, you can't do it. Nonfiction writing can be learned, and honed, but storytelling is bred in the bone—in the marrow.

CD You've won some awards for your work, the result of numerous nominations over the years. How do you feel about awards in general?

CQY I think an award is a lovely way to say thank you, but the work for which the award is given does not magically improve because of the award, and failure to win one does not detract from the worth of the work, which many newer writers are inclined to think is the case.

CD What's the most surprising thing a critic ever wrote about one of your books?

CQY One critic said of the novel *False Dawn* that I had written it for the cynical purpose of exploiting current fears. While I agree that I was deeply concerned about the abuse of the environment—and still am—I did not write the novel cynically, or exploitatively. Good thing, too, because it has hardly been a gold mine.

CD How has your style, voice, approach evolved over your career? Have your creative goals changed?

CQY You should ask Sharon Russell that; she's a professor at Terre Haute who has been studying my work for more than a decade, and has a handle on it. I try not to think about such things because that would make me self-conscious, and being self-conscious is deadly to a writer of fiction. As to my goals: I'd still like to make a better living, and I'd like to find homes for more than a dozen books I want to write, but which haven't sold.

CD What challenges do you set for yourself when you write?

CQY To tell the best story I can, and to keep myself out of it as much as possible.

CD Is good fiction manipulative, seductive, persuasive? Should it offer revelations?

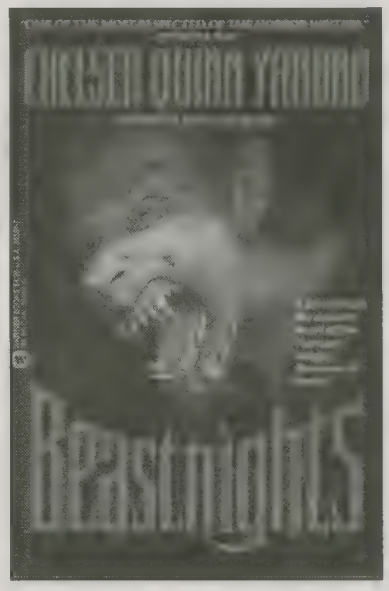
CQY Of course, but at least half of the bargain comes from the reader. I hope I put elements of persuasion in my work, and some opportunities for insights, but I've done this long enough to know that readers will get what they get out of my work, and it may not be remotely what I intended.

CD Do you regret taking a particular scene too far in any of your works?

CQY Not yet.

CD Who are your main literary influences? Whom do you admire in the genre? Outside the genre?

CQY The main literary influence is Shakespeare, no question. I think anyone who can conceive of, produce, and sell a book deserves credit for it, even those writers who don't do very good work. I read widely, and I am often reminded that no one sets out to write a bad book, although that may be the result. And no, I won't provide a list of my current favorites, or "unfavorites," not only because this changes over time, but also because I don't want to say anything my friends and colleagues would find disparaging.



CD Has anyone held the role of "mentor" for you? If so, what did they teach you?

CQY Not as regards writing, no, but as regards professional conduct, emphatically yes. Robert Bloch is at the top of that list, and Anne McCaffrey is close behind. Also, in an odd way, Theodore Sturgeon, and Alice Sheldon (James Tiptree). They gave me much information about publishing and how to behave as a professional ought to, and that has proved invaluable over the years.

CD Have you been following the controversy over the National Book Award going to Stephen King? What do you think it says about the general attitude towards horror as a genre?

CQY I think the major publishers are condescending about what they call genre fiction—not just horror, but all so-called genre fiction—and the critics catch it from the publishers. What they forget is that blockbuster, literary, and mainstream are as much genres as romance and westerns. I'm sorry the critics have had their snobbism revealed for what it is, and I'm delighted for Steve.

CD What would you be doing today if you hadn't become a full time writer?

CQY I haven't the faintest idea.

CD Do you revise or just go with the first draft?

CQY Most of my work is about eighty-five percent first draft, because, for me, the first time through is always the clearest, and subsequent reworkings only tend to muddy the vision.

CD Research. How difficult? Methods? Sources?

CQY Lots and lots of research. The difficulty varies from book to book. I begin with getting a bibliography on the subject in question, and then I go hunting, and reading. I often take experts to lunch and pick brains, and in Berkeley, it's not hard to find genuine authorities on almost any topic.

CD Do you outline?

CQY You betcha, although I may depart from portions of it during writing.

CD Who is your first reader?

CQY I have a couple of friends who see the work while in progress, not only to find inconsistencies, but to check for major grammar and syntax errors, which do happen from time to time. When I finish a book, copies of the ms go to three recreational readers who are not fans of my work, usually friends of friends, with instructions to tell me where they don't understand it— liking it is not the issue in these readings, clarity is. I rarely use such readers more than twice, for they start developing blind spots from knowing my storytelling too well.

CD What do you perceive as your strengths as a writer? Your weaknesses?

CQY Again, I tend not to think about those things, although I know I have a knack with history, which serves my purposes well, and on the negative side, my language tends to be a tad too formal for some readers. Also, I'm persistent, and that's necessary to getting the work done.

CD What are the particular challenges and satisfactions of writing horror fiction?

CQY I enjoy doing it; for challenges, I have to meet or exceed previously published works of mine. There is no competition tougher than my last published book.

CD Do you think you bring anything special to your fiction as a woman? Is there a difference between male and female writers? Do they bring different talents/tools/perspectives to the table?

CQY I think there is a difference between all writers, period. Every writer is a sub-genre of one. As to male and female writers, it is a question too broad for a meaningful answer. Some male writers lean heavily on male fantasies, just as some female writers lean heavily on female fantasies, but for every one who does, there is another who doesn't. Since I am a heterosexual female, I suppose I can't avoid putting some of that spin on my work, but since my work is intended to be about the characters and not about me, I would hope that such intrusions are minimal.

CD Can you talk a little bit about the piece you wrote for *Seven Seasons of Buffy* (Ben Sella Books, 2003)? Do you have a special affection for the show?

CQY Yes. I really like (I use the present tense because it is on twice daily in re-runs) *Buffy*, mainly for its consistency of vision—it rarely breaks its own rules, which is unusual in television shows—and for the affection in which all the characters have been drawn and played. No one is put there solely to be the butt of jokes, or to make others appear better than they are, including the supernatural critters. It is funny without mockery, and it tackles some very real issues without apology or preaching. And, of course, I have a taste for the outré.

CD Regarding Saint-Germain, what first attracted you to explore vampirism? I believe you began writing *Hotel Transylvania* in 1971? How did you feel about Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*? Was the time simply ripe for a re-imagining of the icon?

CQY It all started with *Dracula*, of course. I read it for the first time at fourteen, and started thinking about its implications. Yes, I started *Hotel Trans* in '71, and sold it in '76. I try not to think about Anne Rice or any other writers while I'm working. As to the why of it, I'd say sunspots, which is my explanation for anything unexplainable.

CD Writing a series character—are you afraid you'll get too comfortable with St. Germain, or run out of things to explore?

CQY He's four thousand years old; I've got a lot of times to play with, and many events to deal with. Comfortable and Saint-Germain are not a bad combination, since it makes writing him a matter of following where he goes.

CD Do you already have his full history sketched out, that is, where you plan to take him over the course of the next few novels?

CQY Yes, I really do have a chronology for him. It's about fourteen pages long, and covers almost everything I have said about his experiences, although a couple of things have slipped through the cracks over the years. After Eurasia in 535-537, it's back to Rome during the short, hectic reign of Heliogabalus (hence my current research). I don't know where after that, but I will by next summer.

CD What inspired your latest Saint-Germain novel?

CQY An interest in the Year of the Yellow Snow (535 AD).

CD Can you talk about that book? And also, something about future works?

CQY I'm in the last hundred pages of the new Saint-Germain, called *Dark of the Sun*, and the book is beginning to run—that is, pick up speed. After this is done, I have a couple books that are overdue (the last two years have been difficult, with six deaths in the family including my father at ninety-three; and two old friends dying too young) to finish. And my agent has a number of things circulating.

And by the time this sees print, Ben Bella Books in Texas will have brought out a print edition of *In the Face of Death*, which previously was only available as an e-book. Somewhere in there, the proposal for Saint-Germain #18 will be submitted, and my current research will be put to pragmatic use.

CD You're quite prolific, with some seventy novels in thirty years. What drives that kind of production?

CQY Unpaid bills usually do the trick. And I am somewhat compulsive about writing.

Mr. Goodnight

Kealan Patrick Burke

Kealan Patrick Burke is the author of *The Hides* (Cemetery Dance Publications), *The Turtle Boy* (Necessary Evil Press) and *Ravenous Ghosts* (Delirium Books). Look for his short fiction in *Cemetery Dance, Grave Tales, Inhuman, The Book of Final Flesh, Gothic. net, Would That It Were, Shivers II, Shivers III, Masques V, Subterranean #1, Evermore* and *Corpse Blossoms*. His short story "The Quiet" will be adapted as a short movie by Artificial Films in early 2005. He is currently working on a novel entitled *Master of the Moors*. He can be contacted at: elderlemon2003@aol.com or visit him online at www.kealanpatrickburke.com.

The field behind the house had been overgrown for months, alive with grasshoppers, rabbits and a whole host of hidden creatures.

When Kevin's dad finally got a day off, he borrowed Jed Taylor's tractor and industrial mower, donned his ragged work clothes and set out to conquer the army of weeds.

Days later, the high grass little more than golden stubble, Kevin and his best friend Joey emerged from the cool shadows of the garage, shovels in hand, solemn purpose etched on their youthful faces.

The sun was high in the sky. Hot work lay ahead, but neither the effort nor the heat could dissuade two boys, free of school and hungry for adventure, from their task.

"What if we find buried treasure?" Joe asked, his eyes bright with the excitement.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, would you tell your parents?"

"Why wouldn't I? They'd probably have to help me lift it into the house."

"Yeah, but then you'd have to share it with them. Or worse, they might take it and put it into the bank and not let you spend it until you're a grown-up. That'd suck. But it happens. My cousin Ron—you know, the kid who visits us at Christmas?—well, his grandmother died last summer and left him a lot of money, I mean, *a lot*. Enough to buy ten of those electric scooters at least! But his parents won't let him have it until he's eighteen! That stinks."

"Yeah, you're right," Kevin said, thoughtful. "Maybe we could hide it."

"Or bury it!"

"Don't be dumb, Joey. What's the point in digging it up just to bury it again?"

"Well, no one would find it then, would they? We could bury it someplace we know we'll find it again."

Kevin smiled. They passed beneath the shadows of the large sprawling walnut tree in the middle of the yard and paused for a moment, shovels over their shoulders like rifles. The slightest hint of a breeze cooled the sheen of sweat on their brows and they welcomed it.

After a moment of stomping a furrow in the grass most certainly left in the wake of a gopher, Joey sighed. "Do you think they'll ever find Toby Roberts?"

Kevin scoffed. "Dunno. But I sure hope not."

"Yeah. He's a jerk. I wonder where he went though. It's kinda weird isn't it?"

"Suppose. I bet he just ran away. Probably got in trouble and hopped on a train."

"You think?"

"Sure."

"But they said he didn't take any clothes or food or anything."

"Yeah right. Toby'll steal clothes and food off some poor kid he meets along the way to wherever he's going. That's what bullies do."

"I guess. Hey, at least he won't be picking on *us* anymore, right?"

"Right."

"Cause I'm all wedgied *out!*" Joey said and they moved on out of the shade and down to the bottom of the yard, where the remains of Mom's vegetable garden stood like unkempt green hair.

"Yikes," Joey said, laughing. "How come your Dad didn't cut *that* down? It looks like a jungle!"

Kevin smiled. "He wanted to but Mom wouldn't let him. She says there's still some good in it. Thinks there might be some potatoes or something the deer and rabbits didn't get. Dad wasn't happy about it, but Mom gave him one of her looks and he left it alone."

"Maybe we could hide the treasure in *there?*" Toby suggested and they both laughed.

Just past the nightmarish tangle of weeds and vines, the yard opened out onto the field. The golden earth seemed to catch the sun and hold it, making both boys squint.

Kevin kicked the earth and nodded. "We should dig here."

"Why here?"

"Why not?"

"Why can't I pick where we dig?"

"It doesn't matter!"

"Sure it does," Joey protested. "I know what you'll say if you pick the spot and we find treasure. You'll say you picked the spot so you get more treasure than me."

Kevin clucked his tongue, a habit he couldn't remember picking up but which was driving his parents crazy, especially given that it only occurred whenever he was asked to do something he didn't want to.

"So what if *you* pick the spot? You'll do the same thing!"

Joey mulled this over. Then: "Okay, how about we ask your Dad to pick a spot. That way no one gets a bigger share."

"What'll we tell him we're doing? If we say digging for treasure, then *he'll* want some."

"Tell him we're trying to build a pond."

"Nah, then he'll want to help. He'll probably come back with a big bulldozer or one of those trucks with a great big shovel on front."

"How about your mother then?"

Kevin thought for a moment, hands on his hips, the shovel lying at his feet and then smiled.

Joey followed his gaze. "What are you looking at?"

Kevin beamed. "Mia!"

"Your dog?"

"Yeah, c'mon!" Kevin started racing back toward the garage. Joey, puzzled, followed close behind.

"How is your dog going to help?"

"I'll show you! It's perfect!" Kevin said and skidded to a halt as they reached the concrete apron where Mia, his Black Labrador was lounging in the heat, tongue hanging from the corner of her mouth.

"I think she's dead."

Kevin shook his head. "She always looks like that when she's asleep. C'mon. I'll hold her, you take off her chain."

"Okay, but I don't understand what you're doing. Is she going to dig the hole?"

"No, c'mon, untie her."

The dog raised her head and regarded the boys with disinterest. A single wag of her tail in greeting was all she managed before lowering her head.

"Why do you keep her chained up the whole time anyway? She can't even run. It's mean."

"I know," Kevin said. "But when those new people moved in across the way Mia went nuts and tried to bite them all. The guy said he'd shoot the dog if we didn't tie her up." He stroked the dog's belly as he spoke and the dog rolled over to accommodate him. "Man, that guy was mad. He came over here shouting and cussing. Made my dad real angry. My dad said the dog had a right to run free and that Mia had been pooping right where the guy's kitchen table was before they built the house there. I nearly laughed at that but I was afraid someone'd get mad at me."

Joey unclipped the steel catch from the hook buried deep in the ground, so that only the short stretch of chain in his hand was attached to the dog. This would serve as a leash to keep the animal from bolting.

"It's not fair," he said. "Dog must be bored out of her brains."

"Yeah. You got her? Okay, let's go."

Sensing she'd been untied from her moorings, the dog ran, almost jerking Joey's arm out of its socket and he yelped as she dragged him back down the yard. Kevin doubled over with laughter as Joey cried out for help.

They met in the field, Joey leaning back at an impossible angle as the dog wheezed and coughed and tried to pull away from him. "Take your...stupid dog, will ya?" he pleaded, sweat dripping down his strained face.

Kevin took the leash from him. "Mia, come!" he said and the dog instantly turned and padded back to him.

"Aw man," Joey said, chagrined. "Why didn't you tell me she did that?"

"She probably wouldn't have listened to you."

"So what did we bring her down here for?"

Mia sniffed at the shovels and began to circle, breaking the pattern and doubling back as she followed a scent, huffing at the earth, then abruptly changing course.

Joey frowned. "What's she doing?"

"Watch."

The dog tugged on the chain and Kevin moved forward until Mia stopped and squatted.

Joey's eyes widened. "Aw man! That's gross!"

The dog leered at him as she voided her bowels. When she was done, Kevin led her to the nearest tree and tethered her there, where she watched for a moment, then lay down and dozed in the shade.

Kevin picked up his shovel and motioned for Joey to do the same.

He indicated the curly brown turds lying in the dirt. "*That's* where we dig," he said.

t t t

"So does this mean the mutt gets a share of the treasure?" Joey asked, pausing for breath and squinting at the sun. His hair was damp with sweat, hands dirty from pulling out clumps of earth too heavy for the shovel to handle.

They had been digging for an hour, their shirts pasted to their skin. The hole was wide, but not as deep as they'd hoped. Still, it was a respectable crater and they had no intention of giving up on it yet.

"She'd probably buy a car and drive somewhere where there aren't any neighbors."

Joey wiped the sweat from his eyes and drove the shovel down into the hole with all his might. At the instant of impact, he farted and immediately looked at Kevin for a reaction.

"Aw, *skunk!*" Kevin said and they both broke into laughter, loud enough to send a pair of blue jays shrieking out of their perch atop the walnut tree. Any attempt to stop the hilarity for the next few minutes only made it worse, so they dropped the shovels and staggered around until their bellies ached.

When they finally caught their breath and the laughter faded to contented smiles, Kevin scooted close to the hole. It was deep enough now that it would come up to his knees if he stood in it.

"Maybe we won't find anything," Joey croaked, a hand still clamped across his stomach from laughing so hard.

Kevin adjusted his position until he was on his hands and knees and brought his face closer to the hole.

"What is it?"

"I don't know but we should keep digging."

"You see something in there?" Joey crawled over and tried to see what had captured Kevin's attention.

"No. I don't see anything, but I have a feeling something's down there."

"A feeling? I have a feeling you've been out in the sun too long. Next thing you'll be yarfing your guts up all over the place."

Kevin looked up and grinned. "Better than farting."

They got to their feet, grabbed their shovels and resumed their attack on the earth.

Some time later, with the sun crawling westward through an unblemished blue veil, as the shadows of evening poked their heads out from beneath the trees and tested the air, something happened.

The hole was now deep enough and wide enough for both boys to stand in it up to their waists. A hill of dirt sat a few feet away, punctuated by bits of broken bottles, shredded plastic bags and rocks.

Kevin lifted his shovel and brought it down where the hole narrowed at the bottom. The earth gave way easily beneath the shovel.

Far too easily.

As he slowly withdrew the tool, he saw the earth crumble away into darkness that oozed like oil, staining the dirt and lapping at the sides of the hole in the wake of the disturbance the shovel had caused. He stood there, overcome by a sudden

unpleasant sensation deep within him that what he had discovered shouldn't have been discovered at all.

"Hey, Kev. You getting tired?" Joey asked as he prepared to heave his own shovel back into the hole. He stopped when he saw the black liquid at the bottom. "What's that?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe it's oil! Maybe we struck oil, Kev! Man, if we did then we're rich!"

But Kevin couldn't bring himself to share Joey's enthusiasm and couldn't understand why. It was just black stuff. Nothing special. Probably oil. But for some unknown reason, he knew that it was *not* oil, *not* nothing special. *Not* just black stuff.

And worse, he felt he had done something incredibly, terribly wrong by finding it.

"Kev," said Joey, dropping his shovel and shaking him by the shoulders. "We gotta go tell your Dad! I think we found oil! We'll be millionaires, Kev! Millionaires!"

Kevin tried to smile and wasn't sure if it worked or not. He couldn't take his eyes from the hole and the black liquid slopping around down there.

Joey ceased his happy dancing and came around to Kevin's side. "Are you okay?"

"It's not oil."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"Yeah, right. You're ten years old. You don't know if it's oil or not. You're just trying to make me believe it isn't so I'll go home and then you'll have it all to yourself."

"No," Kevin said. "I'm not. I don't know how, but I know it isn't oil."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe we should get some of it out and put it into a jar or something. We can show your dad and see what he thinks it is? You know? Cuz I think it's oil. Really."

"It's not oil. I don't wanna touch it either. Let's just cover it back up."

Joey looked appalled. "After all the work we put into it? And what happens if it is oil? What happens if we forget about it and some other kid finds oil around here? What then? How many electric scooters can you buy on *your* pocket money, huh?"

But Kevin wasn't convinced. In fact, he thought going any closer to that black stuff than they already were was a terrifying idea. Not knowing why he should feel that way frightened him all the more and he backed away from the hole.

It wasn't so warm anymore. His skin rippled with a sudden chill, even though the sun was still clear and bright. He gripped his shovel tighter.

"C'mon, Kev. What's the matter with you? It's just some gunk!"

Without a word, Kevin dug into the hill of dirt and began to fill the hole.

"Hey, don't!" Joey said and put out a hand to stop him.

And down in the hole something grabbed Kevin's shovel.

"Oh God," he cried and stumbled backward, his feet tangling, sending him sprawling into the high grass of his mother's vegetable garden.

"Kev!"

Green darkness.

Grasshoppers sang their dismay at the intrusion and hopped across Kevin's face, danced on his lips and hid in his hair. Mosquitoes rose to drain his blood as tiny winged beetles mapped out his skin. A small stick, once used to mark the boundary of the garden, stabbed into his thigh and he moaned, batted away the insects and grabbed the hand that burst through the overgrowth.

He was out in the air, in the light, and sobbing. He dropped to his knees, wincing at the stones that bruised them. Mia barked and pulled her leash taut as she struggled to get to him. "It's all right," he told her and after a moment she whined and returned to her spot beneath the tree. This time however, she did not sleep, but watched him.

"Wait, Kev. I'll go get your Dad," Joey said, panic thrumming in his tone. He started to leave but Kevin raised his hand.

"No. I'm...I'm okay."

"What happened? You scared me to death!"

Kevin cleared away his tears and looked toward the hole. The shovel was sticking straight up as if lodged in the earth, but he knew better.

"We need...to fill in the hole," he said and knew by the look on Joey's face that he would not argue.

"Okay, but this sucks. All our hard work and..." He trailed off, and retrieved his shovel from where he had dropped it to help Kevin.

Kevin slowly rose and brushed himself off. The cold feeling seemed stitched to his bones; he couldn't shake it.

It got worse when he noticed Joey, facing the hole, back turned to him, standing motionless with shovel in hand.

A tangy, cloying smell like rotten apples wafted from the hole.

"What's wrong?"

Joey didn't answer.

A slight breeze ruffled his hair. It was the only movement.

"Joey, what's wrong?"

Joey trembled.

Mia started to bark again.

"Answer me!"

"Did you see me?"

Mia stopped barking and sat, head hung low, eyes forward as if chastened by an angry master.

Kevin looked toward the house, then at the field around him, searching for the speaker. But even before he heard it again, he knew it was coming from Joey, even though it was not his voice. It was an adult voice, a man's voice, hollow and unfriendly.

And now he was paralyzed with terror.

"Did you see me? Was it you who ran and told?"

Kevin shook his head, tried to back away but his legs wouldn't move. "I..."

"Was it you who told them where to find me, where to find me and the child? Did you tattletale on poor Mr. Goodnight?"

Joey continued to tremble and Kevin was struck by the immediate need to help him. But how?

"Joey?" he called in a feeble voice. The sun had moved behind the trees on the far side of the field, peering through them with a solitary red eye and making a shuddering silhouette of the boy at the hole.

"Poor form," the Joey-thing said, but it sounded amused. *"Not very sporting at all. I was merely trying to fix the little girl. She had something wrong with her head you see, and if those men had given me the chance I might have told them that that was all I was up to.*

Simply trying to tie together the broken strands in her messed up little head. There's no sin in that, surely? No sin in cracking open the egg to inspect the yolk, hmm? I would certainly have returned her to her parents when I had made sure I'd glued her back together. Where's the harm in that? And they acted like I was a monster, like I was violating the poor thing. How horrid! No, you see their narrow minds could never understand what I was trying to do. They thought it wicked to split a skull open in order to release the horrors, and yet—"

"Joey!" Kevin shrieked, fresh tears blurring the quivering silhouette of his best friend.

"—they had no trouble splitting open mine."

There was no sound at all now. Nature had hushed itself, perhaps sensing something abroad that shouldn't be. The sun was a crimson-eyed voyeur, the breeze like held breath.

"Who are you?" Kevin ventured, even though his mind screamed at him to flee.

"Mr. Goodnight," the Joey-thing replied. "And you are Kevin. But what of your friend here? He seems to have landed himself in a bit of a predicament doesn't he? He seems to be in a bit of a quandary. Shall I fix him for you?"

"Nooo," Kevin moaned through his sobs. "No, please..."

"Shall I crack open his skull and see what has gone awry?"

"Please...just let him go!"

"Hush now, Kevin. Didn't you run and tell on me? Didn't you lead them to me all those years ago?"

The acrid stench of apples grew stronger.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I swear!"

"Come now, we all have our sins to confess. Tell me yours!"

"If I do, will you let Joey go?"

"No, but I promise to take extra special care putting him back together."

Kevin ran before he was sure he still could. A scream sailing from his mouth, he batted branches aside and ran, stumbled, ran, fell, until his feet hit concrete and his father's arms were around him and all he could hear were his own cries and Mia barking.

He whimpered, but would not speak, would not tell. Couldn't. Not as long as the fear boiled within him that as soon as he opened his mouth it would not be his voice that came out.

"Kevin, what happened? Where's Joey?"

Mr. Goodnight took him, he wanted to say but pleaded with his eyes for his father to understand instead. Mr. Goodnight took him to crack open his skull and peer inside.

He was shivering violently, his vision blurred with tears. His father grabbed his shoulders and held him away so he could see his face.

"Kevin, what's wrong? What's going on? Did something happen to you? To Joey? Did someone hurt you?"

Kevin nodded, choked on a sob that drowned out even the thought of words.

"Okay look. You were in the field, right? I'm going to go check it out."

No!

"You go call your mother. Tell her to bring the phone with her. We may need to call the police."

Oh God no, don't! He'll get you!

He made a grab for his father's shirt but the big man was already past him and stalking across the yard. Down in the field, Mia continued to bark, a high yelp of despair.

Kevin moved slowly up the porch steps, watching his father approach the spot where they'd been digging, the evening light sending lithe shadows sprawling across the grass. The door opened and his mother, drying her hands on a dishcloth emerged and looked from Kevin's tear-swollen eyes to his father.

"What's going on?" she asked, her voice high with concern. "Why are you crying?"

DOUGLAS CLEGG

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He shook his head and pointed out at the field.

"Where's Joey? Kevin, talk to me? What's wrong?"

But he couldn't tell her, couldn't make her understand, so he hugged her instead and wept openly against her apron as she stroked his hair.

It seemed like an eternity before his father returned.

"There's no one down there," he said as he mounted the porch steps. "Just a big empty hole, and of course Mia, who's going crazy. I'm going to call Joey's parents, see if he went home. If not, we gotta call the cops. Something isn't right."

They won't find him, Kevin thought as he was led into the house. Not now, not ever.

"Kevin," his mother said once they were inside, "why won't you tell us what happened?"

"He hasn't said anything since he came running up to the house," Dad said, picking up the phone. "Best leave him alone until we find out what's going on. Get him some cocoa or something."

Kevin sat at the table and listened to his father speaking urgently into the phone.

The silence thickened.

And then sirens and lights pierced the burgeoning dark.

They put him to bed though he knew he'd never sleep.

Beneath his pillow was a hammer he'd taken from the garage. It pressed against his head, a constant reminder of both its presence and the reason for it. He wondered if he would even have a chance to reach for it when the time came.

The sounds of garbled voices on police radios, car doors slamming and dogs barking drifted up through the open window as he stared at the cracks in his ceiling. Red and blue flashes of light sailed across his wall, turning innocent shadows into twitching malevolent things.

Joey's gone. Grief settled like a stone in his belly. It couldn't be true, shouldn't be true, but it was and he knew it. He knew no matter how much he tried to pretend he was dreaming the reality was that the glorious summer had, without warning, coughed its darkness out to swallow them all.

And that darkness, that seething evil thing they'd uncovered in the field was still there, a real live bogeyman stalking the night.

Of course, they hadn't released him into the world, he realized. It wasn't their fault that Mr. Goodnight was out there now. After all, children had been disappearing long before today.

No. Mr. Goodnight hadn't been trapped under the dirt.

He'd been sleeping.

They had uncovered his hiding place.

And he would be back, Kevin knew. The security his parents provided, that safety he had always taken for granted was gone now, torn to shreds by a simple day's digging.

No one could save him now.

And as if the thought had summoned him, the bedroom door creaked open and his father, hands stained with dirt, eyes dull and frightened, entered the room and stood looking helpless down at him.

He moved around so that he was standing next to Kevin. Red light flashed across his features, aging them.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Kevin wanted to tell him so very badly that he knew, that he didn't blame his father. Grown-ups had no idea bogeymen were real and slept in the dirt. The only ones who knew were the victims, and those who'd escaped to live another hour or another day before the bogeyman returned to quiet them.

But he said nothing, only nodded slightly.

His father sat on the bed and put a hand on Kevin's chest. The light showed a glimmer of tears in his eyes.

"I don't know what happened to you today, Kevin, but I'm so sorry I wasn't there to stop it."

It's okay, Dad.

"And the police are doing everything they can to find Joey."

There's nothing they can do.

"It would really help if you could tell them what happened. Where he went or…or…who took him."

I wish I could tell them too, but I'm afraid and I don't think they'd believe me.

A sudden strange scent filled the room. Kevin's eyes widened. His throat went dry. Panic fluttered like a trapped bird in his chest. He touched his father's hand.

Hands stained with dirt…

No!

His father's face turned slowly, slowly toward him.

The shadows were thick and danced in the scarlet light.

He might have been smiling.

Oh no no no!

The room smelled like rotten apples.

Not my Dad!

In an instant, Kevin was on his knees face-to-face with his father, the sheets tangled around his ankles, the hammer gripped tightly in one bone-white hand. He raised it over his head, watched the shadows slip away from Dad's face. Saw the eyes widen, the skin drain of blood. Any minute now he would change and then it would be too late.

Too late.

Kevin wailed, grief, agony, and horror raging out of him as he swung the hammer.

It was over rather quickly.

Afterward, Kevin breathed huge gasps of air, the tears hot on his cheeks as he stared in disbelief down at the body on the floor, the face no longer recognizable as anyone he had ever known.

A comic strip speech bubble of blood grew ever wider around the shattered skull in the pulsating light.

And his mother was standing in the doorway, a ghost miming horror as the blood ran down the hammer and trickled over his fingers. Then screaming as she stumbled across the room and dropped to her knees next to the bed, her hands fluttering around the man on the floor, afraid to touch but desperate to hold him, to be sure he was alive.

Which of course he was not.

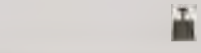
She looked up at her son still kneeling on the bed, his face tattooed with his father's blood.

Her lower lip trembled as she struggled to make the words come out: "Why Kevin…why?"

Kevin shook his head. He wasn't Daddy! I know he wasn't! It was Mr. Goodnight! He tricked me! Oh God, I'm so sorry! Help me!

But when he spoke, it was not his voice that came out.

"Hush now. I'll fix you right up, my dear," he said, helpless to do anything but watch the hammer rise.



A Conversation with

Steve Gerlach

conducted by Ron Clinton

Australian author Steve Gerlach seems inevitably poised on the threshold of universal Big Name success. Having risen quickly through the ranks of the genre's small press in both Australia and the United States, his horror and suspense fiction has systematically captured the imagination of readers not only in those two countries but worldwide. His work has also caught the eye of the New York publishing establishment, resulting in an early-2004 mass-market paperback release of his novel Rage. **In this extensive interview, Gerlach fields questions on life, writing and the woman he can't get out of his mind...**

CD Over the last year or two, you've garnered a considerable amount of publishing success that has allowed your work to reach a significantly larger audience than before. That must be quite gratifying, both creatively and financially, particularly after a decade or more of self-publishing or writing simply for the love of the craft.

SG It is gratifying to finally see your work reaching a larger audience. And, in a way, I have to thank the core group of readers who have been with me since the mid-nineties and who tirelessly recommended my works to others. Certainly, the Internet has made this much easier to do, and being the webmaster of the official Richard Laymon site has helped too. But writing is still the key and still where those thrills are for me. Creating a story, a setting, a world, and delving into interesting (and sometimes bizarre) characters are the core reasons I write. Getting to know these people I create, working out what they would do and how they would react--that's where the biggest buzz is.

CD Before we delve too deep into the more recent successes that have expanded your popularity beyond that core group of readers you mention, let's talk about the early years. You've previously worked as an editor for an international crime magazine and an Australian roadbike magazine, a researcher and columnist for an Australian daily newspaper, and have held various positions within several technical corporations. Since 1996 you've operated the Richard Laymon Kills! website (www.rlk.cjb.net) and recently were also the historical advisor for the film Let's Get Skase. Give us a peek into your background and how you feel these divergent ventures helped shape, or hinder, your creative passion and talent.

SG I guess I've been blessed in having a chance to work in every field of writing. Whether that be non-fiction articles, editing, proofreading or in the film world, it's given me a very well-rounded view of the whole publishing industry. And I think that can only help you as a writer.

CD Specifically, how so?

SG I can see book publishing from an editor's point of view, also from marketing and distribution. My editors know I'm keen on marketing and PR, and I like a hand in working out positioning and design of my novels. I don't know if that's a good thing for them, though (chuckles). As a writer, everything you do is important, because it may come in handy one day as you're writing fiction. I know the contacts I have made in the film and technical worlds are of great importance to me now, as I have people I can contact to answer questions and scenarios that I may need help with.

CD You've a full-time job along with the usual family responsibilities—and yet you've also managed to release two or three novels in about as many years, edit several anthologies and, of course, run not only your own author site at www.stevegerlach.com but the Richard Laymon Kills! website as well. This juggling act must pose quite a challenge.

SG It can be very hard and taxing at times, and sometimes it can mean I have to lock myself away for a couple of weeks to get the basic structure of a novel down on paper, but my system seems to work quite well for me. Who knows, I may patent it one day! *(laughs)*

CD Along with all that, I understand you've also constructed—and still maintain—several fan websites for your other interests.

SG Yes, that's correct. But they haven't been updated for years. Those who have the time and the inclination can probably find a few secret Steve Gerlach sites out there in cyberspace.

CD But one site, I believe, uniquely contains a Gerlach screenplay.

SG Ah, that's true. It's a screenplay—well, teleplay actually—for a BBC science fiction program called *Doctor Who*. The script was submitted for Season 27 of the show, but the show was cancelled before season 27 began. A damn shame too, because it was a great script. But you're right, it's out there on a Who site I created. It's entitled "The Emissary of Death." Sounded like a

good title at the time. Now, I'm not so sure *(laughs)*!

CD Okay, let's get back to the novels. Give us an idea of your writing schedule.

SG Well, it varies for each book. But basically, each book has a very long lead time from when I first get the idea…I research it, plan, outline, and then finally sit down and write it. For example, the novel I'm working on now, *Lake Mountain*, was actually something I planned to write before *Love Lies Dying*. But Zoe Barber from *LLD* came along, and I just had to get to know her more. So *Lake Mountain* was shelved until *LLD* was complete. *Lake Mountain* was actually conceived way back in 1998. But I'm only now starting to write it. 2003 saw me researching this novel for about six months (around about the same research time as *LLD*) and I've spent the last couple of months getting the story and characters together. I've only just started writing. So that's, what, 5 years from inception? Jeez, that's a scary thought.

CD It sounds as though you're as studious and conscientious about your writing duties as you might be about any regular job. How about the daily grind—what's your activity and time spent writing from day-to-day?

SG When I sit down to write, I have to treat the novel as a job. If I don't, I'd sit around and procrastinate all day. So, when I'm not at work with my day job, my routine starts at 7 am to read the previous day's writing. Then I write until about noon. I stop for lunch and go for a walk, shop at the mall or something. Anything to get me out of the house. Then I edit what I've written from about 3 pm till 5 pm. Dinner then news. Then a damn good movie to finish off the day. Go to bed, sleep, get up the next day and start again. This type of freedom mostly occurs when I'm on vacation from work, or weekends, holidays, and so forth; otherwise, I just simply try to make as much time for writing as I'm able.

CD Since your writings have settings and a style that is distinctly American, many of your newer readers may be surprised to know that you've lived in Australia your entire life. Why have you opted to tailor your stories to an American audience—is it a personal preference or an obligatory requisite for publishing success?

SG Yes, I'm Australian born and bred, although I've visited the U.S. on three occasions. As far as tailoring my stories, I try to write in a "your world" style. That way the events and people and places can translate to anywhere—specifically, the world of the reader—your world. The thriller/horror market in Australia is not particularly large, nowhere near as large as the U.S., so I have always tried to write with that market in mind. *The Nocturne* certainly took place in the U.S., but the rest could take place anywhere in "your world".

CD Do you find it difficult translating your cultural influences to fit a generic universal flavor?

SG Actually, it's not that hard at all. The world's a big place, but we're growing to be more and more alike these days. Especially in the case of the U.S. and Australia. I always write the first draft using Australian terms and words I'm familiar with. Then as the edits go along, I pull it closer to the U.S., swapping terms here and there. Plus, of course, my U.S. editors are always on the ball, changing words they feel need to be changed for an American audience. I keep a list of those and make the changes accordingly in any new work I write. In the end, not much is different.

CD We mentioned before your involvement with the Richard Laymon Kills! website. This began in December of 1996, I believe. What prompted you to design this acclaimed site that nearly from the start had the integral involvement of its namesake—and what drives you to continue its monthly updates nearly three years after Mr. Laymon's tragic passing in February 2001?

SG I've been reading Laymon now for about 15 years. My first Laymon was *The Woods Are Dark* and I was hooked from the first chapter and never looked back. I always pestered publishers and bookstores about the next Laymon release, but they never seemed to have any details—or they didn't care. When I first connected to the Internet in 1996, my first search was for a website dedicated to Laymon. I was pretty disappointed when I couldn't find one. So, I thought, it was up to me to become the one-stop-shop for everything Laymon. So, that's how it started. Luckily, the planets were all aligned and not only did I get the publishers' support, but also Richard's support as well. The site will continue to be the place Laymon fans can gather to discuss his work.

CD Let's talk about Richard Laymon a bit more since he is so clearly an inspiration for your own work. Tell us a bit about the man you knew as Dick, and how he influenced your life and your writing.

SG He's influenced me quite a great deal, no

Cover art for Lake Mountain *(Bloodletting Press).*
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doubt about that. As you find when you read my novels, they have the same cut-to-the-bone style as Dick's. I like the way he wrote, and I like reading that sort of style. So, I also like to write that way myself. I'm not one for pages and pages of description or exposition. But he's not my only inspiration. Robert Bloch, Richard Matheson, Rod Serling, Jack Ketchum have all influenced me over the years.

CD What do you feel is ultimately Laymon's legacy when it comes to horror fiction, the genre he helped champion and popularize?

SG I think Richard's legacy (to both me and the genre) is two-fold. One: always push the limits, both of the genre and yourself as a writer. He went to extremes, sometimes to sickening effect, but it always worked and he always managed to pull it off. Even with his recent release, *Amara*, I found myself shaking my head and thinking, 'Yep, Dick's done it again! I can't believe he wrote that!' (Laughs)

His second legacy is: don't take it all so seriously. Richard was always happy, always willing to share a joke, always willing to go the extra mile for someone. In the end, this isn't rocket science, lighten up and enjoy it...you'll go crazy otherwise.

CD Okay, let's dive into your published works thus far. *Rage* (WildRoses Productions, 2003, 26-copy signed/limited HC; Bloodletting Press, 2003, 300-copy signed/limited HC; Leisure Books, 2004, mass-market paperback), which was your last full-length novel to be published, was actually one of the first written—back in 1992, I believe. How did this slim novel find its way out of the proverbial trunk and ultimately into a mainstream New York publishing house?

SG Well, *Rage* has always been my dirty little secret. When I wrote it in 1992, I shopped it around to the publishers down here. One of them wanted to publish it, but the marketing department didn't know how to market it, and they were worried it would be banned. So, I shelved the novel, threw it in the filing cabinet, and let it gather dust. After the success of *The Nocturne* and *Love Lies Dying*, Troy Taylor from WildRoses Productions, a small publisher down here in Australia, wanted a "Gerlach Original." I told him there weren't any, and that *Lake Mountain* was at least two years away. He said that I must have something somewhere, and that's when I mentioned *Rage*. He wanted to read it, and I said no. But he kept at me and eventually I told him I'd read it and let him know if it was any good.

CD And what were your initial impressions upon reacquainting yourself with it?

SG That it's amazing that a novel can really mature in 10 years. I mean, the issues I was dealing with back then are just as prevalent today, probably even more so with the Columbine shootings and tragedies of that ilk. So, I gave it to him to read and he snapped it up immediately. It was printed as an ultra limited down here and sold out before publication. And that's when the U.S. publishers became interested and got involved. In fact, I've had a lot of interest from a great many different sources on this one. So I'm proud my "black sheep," as it were, has finally found a place in the world. And with the Bloodletting Press limited edition and Leisure mass-market paperback hitting the streets, hopefully its popularity will continue.

CD Do you foresee any of your other trunk novels shaking off their dust to appear anytime soon?

SG Nope. I don't think so. There's two still gathering dust, *Unforeseen Circumstances* and *Injustice*, but I don't think I'll ever wipe the cobwebs off those. Although, I said the same thing about *Rage*, so who knows...one day, maybe.

CD *Rage* is, perhaps more than any other of your novels, a character-driven novel; it's all about Ben and his personal, inner drama. Do you find novels of this type easier to write than more plot-driven narratives, like *The Nocturne*, for example, or more difficult—and why?

SG Each novel comes with its own unique difficulties and problems. I don't think any of them are necessarily harder than another to write; they are each unique and come with advantages and disadvantages. The advantages with *Rage* were that it was a simple linear story, where the characters take center-stage. Really, it's a character study, just like *Love Lies Dying*. Whereas novels like *The Nocturne* and *Hunting Zoe* are more plot or story or "chase" driven. The upcoming *Lake Mountain* will be a bit of both.

CD I understand the signed and limited hardcover of *Rage* from Bloodletting Press contained edited portions deemed too extreme for the earlier Australian hardcover and Leisure paperback. Care to share any hints on these tasty tidbits—and do you personally see yourself as an author who enjoys "pushing the envelope"?

SG Yes, that's true. For the Aussie release, I removed the scenes that had the Aussie publisher back in 1992 all worried about it being banned. I reinserted them for the U.S. edition after discussions with Larry Roberts, the publisher at Bloodletting, who believed they should be reinstated. And I agree with him on that. They are extreme though. Probably the most extreme I've written in any novel.

CD The novel you wrote next—but the first actually published—was *The Nocturne* (Probable Cause Productions, TPB, 1999), a horror/sci-fi thrill ride. I can't help but notice there was quite a time lag between the writing of *Rage* at the beginning of the '90's and *Nocturne*'s publication much later in the decade.

SG Yes, and no, I guess. I finished *Rage*, probably, in 1992. I then shopped it around for a year or so down here. I was then planning and working on the outline for *The Nocturne*. But I was working for Australia's biggest newspaper at that time, so my novel-writing time was cut drastically. By the time I got to writing *The Nocturne*, then editing it to my liking, it probably gets us to 1995 or 1996. But while there's a large gap between actual novel completion dates, there's a whole lot of behind-the-scene stuff going on.

CD More research?

SG Yeah, in fact I traveled to Arizona specifically for that novel. Even though it ends up taking place in

Washington State! (Laughs) Best laid plans and all that...

CD The contrast in both pacing and structure between the two divergent works is quite pronounced. The Nocturne comes off as a much more accomplished, confident novel, resounding with a clear maturity of style and ability. Upon completion of the work, what was your sense of the book?

SG Well, to begin with, I'd buried *Rage* away in a cupboard, thinking it was too extreme and too violent for anyone to read. So with *The Nocturne* I took another track. I pushed myself in another direction, wanting to see if I could write a chase novel that starts at 100 miles an hour on page one and doesn't let up until the final page. That was my goal, and I was very happy with the results. At the time, I felt it was my best novel, and it certainly was to that date. The style had improved, as did the plotting and characterization, which is what you'd hope for coming a few years after my last novel.

CD The full-throttle, staccato pacing of this novel is extreme and, at times, almost exhausting; your intention was obviously to create a work that was pure and undistilled suspense of the highest order. In both its aforementioned pacing and its skewed outdoor-survival theme, it's the closest in both style and content to the writings of Richard Laymon. As indicated before, he was clearly a huge influence in both your life and art. Was *The Nocturne* essentially your homage to the man you consider your mentor?

SG Certainly, in lots of ways, I think so. *The Woods Are Dark* was the first Laymon novel I read. It pulled you in on page one and didn't let go until the story was complete, and that was something I was aiming to do with *The Nocturne*. I wanted to create the same pace and suspense, not let the reader go for one second, so they would be as exhausted as the characters by the end of the book. And I think the novel succeeds like that. I can think of only two sections in the novel where I actually give the reader a chance to, well, "breathe."

CD Did you receive any feedback from Mr. Laymon, either before or after publication?

SG Once I'd completed the novel to my satisfaction, Richard gave it a read and suggested a few things—one being to move it from Arizona to Washington State. Which is what I did. His comments and influence made the book much leaner and starker, for sure.

CD Now, for those who haven't had an opportunity to read *The Nocturne*, tell us a bit about this novel.

SG *The Nocturne* deals with a motley group of people, fleeing a fire that is destroying their whole town. They are detoured onto a side road and into uncharted forest where they come across another town where people are...well, not as they first seem. They have to band together to fight for their lives, while also trying to escape the firestorm that is coming their way. They have limited time and resources, and every step they take could lead to death, one way or another. It's lots of fun.

CD Along with the darkness, *The Nocturne* also had a bit of a science-fiction flavor to it. Do you plan on revisiting that genre in part or whole anytime soon?

SG Ooooooooh, but did it? That's the big question, isn't it? I was heavily influenced by Bentley Little's *The Mailman* at the time, and that's a novel with no real answer in the end. The readers have to fend for themselves on that one. And the same is true, to an extent, with *The Nocturne*. Was it sci-fi? Was it government conspiracies? Was it? WAS IT? I had a hell of a time deciding whether or not to include the epilogue that is now part of the novel. I originally left it out, but I think it's good to have there now, as it does give some closure to the novel. But the other questions you have to work out for yourself. But I do believe that sci-fi and Steve Gerlach don't mix. At least, that's what I think now, anyway. Who knows, in the future, maybe. I don't rule anything out. But there's no plans right now.

CD The original version, an unsigned trade-paperback self-published under your Probable Cause imprint, was limited to just, what, 200 copies or so? However, I understand that it, along with *Love Lies Dying*, is due to be reprinted in a signed/limited hardcover by Bloodletting Press, the publisher of the signed/limited hardcover of *Rage*. You must be quite pleased that your backlist is being reprinted to such popular demand.

SG The good thing about Larry Roberts and the guys at Bloodletting Press is that they have always had a vision of a "Gerlach Library" of hardbacks, available uncut and in full glory, for the U.S. market. From the very beginning of our discussions, Larry was always talking that way. And I like a guy with a marketing edge and a grand plan. So it will indeed be very nice to see *The Nocturne* and *Love Lies Dying* joining Rage as part of Bloodletting Press' "Gerlach Library"! And who knows what will happen with volume four and five of that library...stay tuned!

CD Your next novel, 2001's *Love Lies Dying*, was the second and final one published by your Probable Cause Productions. You earlier mentioned your research into the S&M fetish for this novel—you clearly did your homework, so to speak, as many of the intimate activities portrayed between the two central characters could make even the most jaded reader wince. This erotically-charged novel was, again, quite a departure from the novel that preceded it.

SG As each novel should be! No reader wants to read the same

story twice. Each novel needs to be as vastly different as the ones that preceded it. But, again, this is where the characters are so important. John Murdock and Zoe Barber are totally different to Ben and Christine in Rage or Jeff and Donna in The Nocturne. They're the two who carry this story, and both author and reader watch how they react to the situations they're presented with. And, yes, there was quite a bit of research that went on for *Love Lies Dying*, including a visit or two to a house of domination. What I learned there, and from talking to the mistresses at the house, was absolute gold for *LLD*. And, once again, it was the little things that became important. The style of a tied knot, the smell of sexual sweat, the way a keyring is carried...

CD *Love Lies Dying* is the story of John Murdock, an every-man tangled in a bizarre and horrifying web of events. John comes home to find his wife, Helen, missing, and a rather cryptic—and very possibly psychopathic—young female lying naked on his sofa. The woman turns out to be Zoe Barber, who leads John on a desperate journey to locate his wife...with plenty of masochistic and violent detours along the way. But *LLD* is more than just a two-person drama. Much of *LLD*'s story structure revolves around the lead male character's interaction with an omnipresent "inner voice", a voice that remains an integral yet enigmatic presence through much of the story, one that serves both to berate and enlighten him regarding his motivations. What was your impetus for including this plot vehicle?

SG Basically, *Love Lies Dying* is a book of threes. It has three sections, three words in the title, three main characters, three main settings and...well, I won't spill anymore for those who haven't read it. The "inner voice" was necessary as I knew I would have an extended period of time in the middle of the book where one of the main characters would be alone and, well, tied up for a while.

CD *LLD*'s lead female character, Zoe, is one of the most intriguing and beguiling femme fatale antagonists in recent genre fiction. Her motivations and history remain tantalizingly unclear throughout most of this spare, fast-paced novel, adding an eerie puzzle to a novel already drenched in gut-wrenching suspense and sexual savagery. Tell us a bit about how this woman who could haunt men's dreams—and their worst nightmares—came to be born, and what inspirations you perhaps drew on for her character.

SG I knew Zoe Barber. It's that simple. Okay, not really Zoe Barber, but the Zoe on the dedication page of the novel is the Zoe in the novel. Of course, she wasn't that extreme. In fact, she'd die of embarrassment if she read the novel, but she's her. No doubt about it. I knew her for a fleeting moment of time, and I miss her still. But not as much as I miss Zoe Barber (laughs)! When working on the outline for *Lake Mountain*, Zoe Barber entered my head one day, and wouldn't leave until her story was told. So, I had to put aside *Lake Mountain* and focus on *LLD*. The story contained in *LLD* is her story, as told to me, and she herself is an amalgam of a few girls I knew. Her backstory is real, if pumped up a little; her experiences are real, if skewed a little...and the face and body of Zoe are even more real. In fact, they're exact. Right down to the little scar across her left eyebrow.

CD Perhaps more than any of your other novels, *LLD* exemplifies the timeless thematic wellspring of which Richard Laymon drew on so often: the practice of plunging a naive character deeper and deeper into turmoil of their own misguided making. John Murdock, the lead male protagonist, was pushed, pulled and, yes, even punctured far beyond the limits of most individuals, yet his own obsession and questionable trusting nature drew him in further still. The feedback from your readers in Australia, the U.K. and United States demonstrates this is a wellspring from which they greatly enjoy drinking—why do you think its appeal is, and continues to be, so universal?

SG I think it's the edge. It's the danger. It's where none of us would ever tread. I've had many guys who have read *LLD* say to me, "I'd love to do it with Zoe Barber, but of course, I never would!" And that's the whole point. Here's a guy who knows he's in above his head, he knows things are spiraling out of control around him, but he goes on, deeper and deeper, because Zoe is there with him. He does what we would (hopefully) never do. We'd back out much earlier. Or would we? And that's the key. In the same way urban legends teach kids not to go down that dark lane to make-out, maybe *LLD* has the same effect for men who want to obtain the unobtainable. John Murdock gets that chance, takes it, and just look what happens to him! Maybe it teaches us all to be weary of the blonde bombshell.

CD And furthering that seemingly inextricable link between Zoe Barber and obsession comes the novella *Hunting Zoe* (Wild Roses Productions, signed/limited hardcover, 200 numbered copies, 26 lettered copies). For an author whose previous backlist would indicate a reluctance to revisit familiar characters or settings, this novella comes as a considerable departure. As you mentioned, that aura of obsession, of near compulsion, which seems to radiate from the Zoe Barber character apparently extended even to her creator.

SG Well, she had a hold over me, for sure. I'll admit it. And I know a lot of people who read *LLD* wanted Zoe to come back. Ironically, a novel dealing with obsession caused many readers to become obsessed with the main character! She's a powerful girl, is Zoe Barber. But I originally said no to a sequel. I don't like them and never wanted to write one. Yet the more I thought about it, the more another story surfaced. And Zoe came back into my head to help me on the way with it. So, yes, *Hunting Zoe*, is the result. But this isn't a sequel as such—it's a side trip, a campfire yarn, that will bring more of Zoe's story to the readers who wanted to learn more.

CD A truly unique and original take on the concept of a sequel, *Hunting Zoe* examines an inverted intersection between reality and fiction and manages to successfully blur the boundary even further. Your two fictitious lead characters, Glen and Mark, set off to retrace the plot-points and settings of the real-life novel, *Love Lies Dying*, hopeful that what they've read in their favorite book is in fact true and that Zoe, the object of their obsession, actually exists. What they find is somewhat what they'd hoped—and yet altogether

different from what they may have expected—to find. And paralleling their quest, this novella is very much, and at the same time very different than, what one might expect of a "sequel." Tell us some of what went into the writing of this novella and why you took the original approach you did.

SG Well, as I said, sequels just don't work for me. And I was certainly not going to do a Hollywood-type "HA-HA! You got me but you didn't" sequel. Some things in *LLD* are just too hard to overturn, and I certainly wasn't about to try. But what I did notice, from talking with readers and fans of *LLD*, was the same comments, the same ideas, coming from them over and over again. Much of the dialogue between Glen and Mark is recreated from readers' comments and discussions. These conversations really happened. These guys really exist! So I thought I would use them to create a new slant on the *LLD* world. I mean, when it comes down to it, *LLD* is based in fact. The places exist, the people exist...hell, even the backstory exists! So I decided I would play on the blurring of fact and fiction in *LLD*. I'd play on that story, or the author's "lies" if you will, to create a side story, a fictional account of two fans, hunting down the facts of their favorite piece of fiction.

CD Let's flash-forward to the next novel due out. You've referred several times to *Lake Mountain*, the new novel on which you're currently working. Is this your next scheduled book?

SG It's been sold to Bloodletting Press as a signed/limited hardcover, and has an anticipated publication date of January, 2005. There's a hell of a lot of interest in this one, and I think everyone's going to enjoy the ride. There's actually some cool pre-publication merchandise running around, so keep your eye out for it. They're rare and hard to find, but they're out there.

CD I've been fortunate enough to have viewed the six-minute promotional CD-ROM video trailer for this novel and I must say I was quite impressed—not only by the tantalizing Hitchcockian homage but the infectious enthusiasm you obviously have for your work and, as well, the marketing aspect of it. Do you feel in this age of dwindling midlist-author rosters that it's contingent upon an aspiring writer to make themselves stand out from the crowd, to show a wary publisher that not only can one cook up the proverbial steak but also understand the importance of selling the sizzle?

SG It's a tough world out there these days and everyone's thinking of their bottom line. The days of publishers having the money and time to spend on advertising and marketing materials have long gone, if they ever existed in the first place. Sure, if you're a King or Koontz, it's there for you, but if it isn't, you need to be the face of your book. It's that simple. It's your book, your work, you have to publicize it. Me sitting back in the pool and waiting for the magic to happen is a sure road to failure. Musicians can't release a CD and then take the next eight months off. They have to do interviews, go on tour, all those things to make the CD sell. It's the same with books. And, seeing as I've had a background in marketing and PR, I like to be involved in the publicity and the marketing of my novels. I'm always looking for something quirky and different, something that pushes the novel out in front of readers who may not know me and make them think, "Yeah, I'd like to try this guy." So, with the Bloodletting Books version of *Rage*, the lettered edition is signed in my own blood, and for *Lake Mountain* there's that six minute video "trailer" you mentioned which, I'm glad to say, has got a lot of people talking about the novel. The trailer went out on CD-ROM—along with a TeamGerlach cap—to publishers and media organizations.

CD So, for those who haven't had the opportunity to view the trailer, can you share an advance glimpse into what the novel is about?

SG I'd like to tell you what the novel's about, but I don't tell anyone until it's complete.

CD Superstitious?

SG No, mainly because the story could change and I don't want to give people the wrong impression about the tale. Let's just say it's different to everything that I've written in the past, and this will be pushing me out to the edge yet again. It's a harrowing tale of love, betrayal and maggots (laughs). It'll be a road-tale, a chase book. And it'll contain some very interesting characters indeed.

CD At a relatively young age, with four published novels or novellas already under your belt, you would seem to have a very long and prosperous writing career ahead of you. What direction do you see your writing taking in the immediate future, and what career goals would you like to have accomplished in the next, say, 10 or 15 years?

SG Well, every new novel is a step in the right direction. In the next 10 or so years? I'd like to see more of my work out there. I don't know how many novels will be published in that time, but there's certainly a few more already cooking in the pot once *Lake Mountain* is complete. The five-volume novella series, *1000 Mettle Folds*, has been sold to Bloodletting Press; Cut 1, set in the late 19th century, will be out in late July of 2005. This series is a horror/mystery hybrid that spans different periods of time and follows a specific group of people tracking a killer. Each book, while different in tone, is connected to the one that came before and after. Likely to follow will be the novel *Dead Of Night*, a tale of urban warfare. The city as jungle. And one small boy's fight for survival. There's also an Armageddon-style novel...but that's a whole other story.

I write for the thrill, for the enjoyment, for the buzz of telling a good tale and having readers enjoy what they read. That's the clincher for me. So, in 10 to 15 years if I'm able to write another, say, 5 novels or so, I'll be more than happy. Obviously the goal is to break into the U.S. market, and that's already happening. So let's hope it continues to gather pace. I'm working with some terrific people at my various publishers, so I can only hope our beneficial relationship continues.

Ron Clinton's work has been published in *Cemetery Dance* magazine, *Mystery Scene* magazine, the anthologies *In Laymon's Terms* and *Tales From the Gorezone*, and various on-line venues. He lives with his wife and two daughters in the Seattle area of Washington State.

Feature Review

In the Night Room

reviewed by Bev Vincent

FICTION AND REALITY form an uneasy alliance in Peter Straub's recent novels. One cannot neglect the possibility that writer Tim Underhill has further fictionalized events in books featuring him. What is presented as Underhill's journal may actually be parts of his novels.

Take *lost boy, lost girl*, Straub's book novel, which supposedly depicts Underhill's fantastic adventures while investigating his nephew's disappearance. *In the Night Room* reveals that *lost boy, lost girl* is actually Tim Underhill's latest novel and the otherworldly events portrayed in it were his attempts to come to grips with the boy's likely fate and to provide a rosier, albeit fictional, outcome.

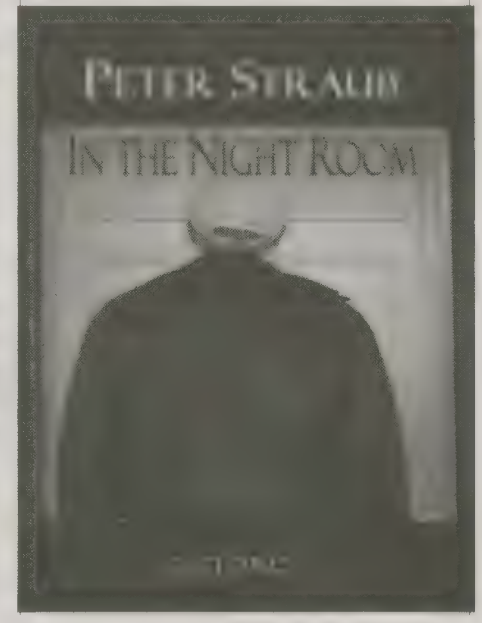
A car struck Underhill when he was a young boy on the same day his older sister was murdered by a serial killer. His unique status as a fictional novelist who fictionalizes reality, crossed with his near-death experience, has caused a rift in the ether. This may explain why he's seeing the ghost of his dead sister and getting bizarre, fragmentary e-mail messages from people he knew in high school who are now dead.

One detail he fabricated in *lost boy, lost girl* has enraged the spirit of deceased serial killer Joseph Kalandar. An e-mail literate spiritual guide called Cyrax tells Underhill that he needs to fix what he did wrong in the novel; otherwise, there will be chaos between the mundane and spiritual realms.

In a separate but cleverly related storyline, award-winning children's novelist Willy Patrick is engaged to a man who seems intent on controlling her life while simultaneously distancing her from his. Willy wonders if she might be going mad because she is suffering disturbingly long gaps in her memory. She also believes that her murdered daughter is alive and being held in a warehouse near her new home.

When she discovers shocking information about her first husband's death, her flight path takes her directly to Underhill. He recognizes her instantly and knows far more about her than any person should. With Cyrax's assistance, Tim comprehends the significance of his encounter with Willy, and the two set out for Millhaven to unravel the missing details about the evil house once owned by Kalandar and the so-called "night room" that lies within.

In the Night Room grew out of Straub's dissatisfaction with a novel he was working on. His solution was to put the book into the hands of Tim Underhill, who first appeared in *Koko* and has become an increasingly pivotal part of Straub's fiction. Something of a surrogate Straub, Underhill frequently receives compliments from people who preferred the books he did with his collaborator.



The relationship between creator and creation is important to *In the Night Room*, as it was in the final books of the Dark Tower series. One question that arises in Straub's recent books is: How many levels deep does his fiction go? When is Underhill telling the truth and when is he concocting a convenient fantasy to make himself feel better about reality? As Underhill tells someone who questions his plan to mix fact and fiction in a new book, "Fiction lets me really get the facts right. It's a way of reaching a kind of truth I wouldn't otherwise be able to discover."

Straub touches on such interesting enigmas as: What happens to a fictional character if his creator dies? He also postulates that rare copies of each book exist that tell the story perfectly, before the writer screwed it up. "No mistakes, nothing dumb, and all the dialog and details exactly right." *In the Night Room* approaches that level of perfection.

Exciting News For Magazine Subscribers !

Cemetery Dance Magazine Slipcases Are Here!

Over the years we've been asked if there's a good way for our readers to store their copies of Cemetery Dance magazine — something better than tossing them in a cardboard box in the basement!

Well, we talked to our new case designer and he proposed a special fitted, Limited Edition slipcase that will hold approximately ten issues of the magazine. As the above artist's rendering shows, they are dark blue with the Cemetery Dance logo stamped in gold on both the spine and front of the case... **AND** the inside is fully lined with black felt! Very extravagant!

These are custom made so you'll want to get your order in as soon as possible. We took PREorders for these in early 2004 but we ordered enough extras to sell on our site. Once these extras sell out, we'll have to take PREorders again and there might be a wait. If you want yours right away, order now!

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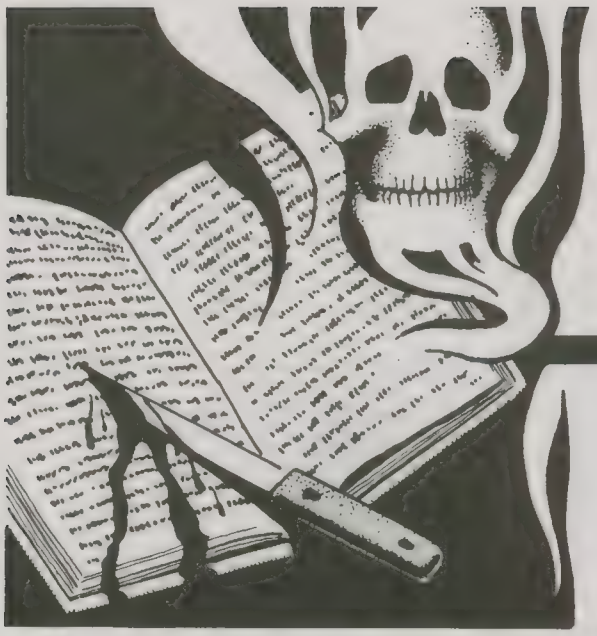


CD REVIEWS

BOOKS, VIDEOS, SOFTWARE...

***100 Jolts*, by Michael Arnzen; Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2004; 156 pgs.; $12.95**

In his introduction, author Michael Arnzen states that "Horror is the genre of the jolt, the shock, the spark." To prove his point, he then offers up one hundred short stories to his audience, the longest, "Five Mean Machines," only nine pages in length (many are only one paragraph long), each designed with the idea of creating an immediate, visceral reaction in readers. It's a measure of Arnzen's talent that he more often than not achieves this goal, all without losing sight of a couple basic tenets of storytelling, those being to grab and hold your reader, and maybe make him think in the bargain. Despite the limits he's imposed on himself, Arnzen still proves capable of doing just that in little gems like "Nightmare Job #1" through "Nightmare Job #5" (think of it as a mini miniseries), "The Curse of Fat Face," and "Her Daily Bread." One warning before you begin *100 Jolts*, though—like the candy in a Whitman sampler, you'll find yourself gobbling up one tale after another. Not a big problem, until you abruptly come to the end, still craving more. You might consider exerting some willpower, and force yourself to sample these varied delights over several days, thus maximizing their impact.

–Hank Wagner

***Afterhell: Dark Descent*, by Joe Medina (creator); Audio Drama Compact Disc, Ollin Productions (www.afterhell.com), 2004; $16.00**

I do not like audio books. The main reason is the voice of the reader. When you read a book, you conjure a voice, or at least the idea of a voice, for each character. In an audio recording of a book, the reader on the tape or CD adds his or her own voice (or, in the worst cases, *inflections*) and that changes the experience for the intended reader/listener. Some might argue that this added dimension is an improvement, but I strongly disagree. I see it instead as an erosion of imagination of the would-be reader and perhaps a symptom of the crippling laziness that afflicts people who cannot even be bothered to scan a line of text. Audio books are a scourge.

Audio drama is something different. We are talking radio plays, here. The voices you hear in a radio play are a designed element of the medium rather than a marketing afterthought. If the story is OK, the radio program is enjoyable as long as the voice actors are good. If the actors are not any good, then listening to the drama can be unbearable.

Afterhell: A Dark Descent is a new audio drama from Ollin productions. According to the press material, "[H]orrors have been set loose on the world. Planet Earth is changing to fulfill a new role in the universe. It is the new Hell. Madness and evil are everywhere." And so on. It is a canned plot that is supposed to be more entertaining because of the acting–the on-the-spot reporting of catastrophic events, for instance, is all the more dramatic for the actors sounding scared and confused and the like. Well, all right, that might have worked if the actors didn't sound like civic theater rejects. To be plain: the acting is terrible, an effect amplified by the poor direction of the play. The CD only runs about 40 minutes or so, but it seems like three hours. And they want you to spend $16.00 on this thing. My advice is leave it on the shelf.

–Wayne Edwards

***The Atrocity Archives*, by Charles Stross; Golden Gryphon (www.goldengryphon.com), 2004; 274 pgs.; $24.95**

The Atrocity Archives sounds pretty gruesome, but it's not the horror show the title suggests. It includes the short novel 'The Atrocity Archive', an additional brand-new novella, 'The Concrete Jungle', an introduction by Ken Macleod, an Afterword by Charles Stross and a multi-page 'Glossary of Abbreviations, Acronyms and Organizations'. The book definitely lives up to the plurality of its title. But *The Atrocity Archives* turn out to be more fun than the grim moniker might imply.

In 'The Atrocity Archive', Bob Howard is the prototypical desk-jockey who just wants a shot at active duty. Up until recently, he was the Laundry's tech guy. This Laundry doesn't whitewash clothes; it cleanses reality itself, of those pesky demons and Lovecraftian entities that try to break through into everyday life, using the specialized math that collapses the barriers between parallel universes. Bob's first shot has him clambering around piles of floppy disks and re-formatting hard drives. His next job sends him to Santa Cruz, California, to interview a British scientist working in the states who may have stumbled on to some of those hazardous equations. Turns out the scientist is a beautiful redhead, and that's OK by Bob. It's not so OK when she's kidnapped to be used as a sort of human battery that will help open up a path through those difficult maths for some unfriendly beings. Bob intervenes and that's just the beginning.

'The Concrete Jungle' finds Bob assigned to a case that appears at first glance to be an obscure prank. But as he goes through a series of very cleverly told stories found in (what else?) the archives, he finds there's quite literally much more than meets the eye. Starting out in the Greek myths and ending up in the computerized surveillance of the twenty-first century, 'The Concrete Jungle' kicks bureaucratic butt with a ripping tale of ancient monsters constantly re-invented through evolving technology.

Stross has a great ability to put the reader in one weird scene after another. Whether we're cowering outside of a high-tech hideout or crouching in a cave on the coast of nineteenth century India, Stross has the ability to slap the reader about in space and time. Not only does he enjoy conjuring many-tentacled critters; he's damn good at it. Stross understands the kind of cosmic awe that Lovecraft was capable of creating and is adept at doing so himself. But he adds a leavening sense of

humor that keeps the Deep Thoughts as entertaining as the tentacles. You'll find yourself in fits of hysterical laughter while teetering on the edge of an abyss. It's an exciting, unpredictably wild ride.

-Rick Kleffel

***Banquet for the Damned*, by Adam L.G. Nevill; PS Publishing, 2004; 494 pgs.; $60**

An effectively frightening and original homage to the supernatural themes and subtly shocking literary style of M. R. James, *Banquet of the Damned* honors the dean's approach to the ghost story while injecting into this exacting tradition of insinuation, atmosphere, and careful phrase a contemporary approach to mood and character.

In a plot as full of ghastly surprises as the labyrinthian exteriors of its setting, Dante and Tom, a rock musician and an explorer, enter the mediaeval streets of St. Andrews, Scotland's oldest university town, a place where spiraling beaches and ancient city streets throb with ancient tragedies. In this hotbed of ancient witchcraft, men and women are called from their beds by voices without mouths to word them, and destinies worse than death. Dante and Tom, two drifters—rather likeable rogues—are caricatures of a 'type' as well as carefully drawn characters whose emotions and reactions make them breath with the vitality of life. They soon find themselves entangled with the sinisterly charming Eliot Coldwell, the infamous magician and author of a tome entitled "Banquet of the Damned." As eldritch manifestations are sensed in glimpses and half shadows (so very more disturbing than if they were thrown upon the audience in full light), Dante and Tom struggle for sanity amidst ancient vengeance and the deadly cult which worships it.

Pregnant with horror both visceral and suggestive, Nevill's novel-length study of mounting dread, malignant forces, and personalities whose very flaws invite occult interference stands as one of the few supernatural novels capable of maintaining the atmosphere of menace and authenticity of setting most often successfully employed in the short story. Evoking, as Ramsey Campbell points out in his introduction, "the glancing image that shows just enough to suggest far worse," Nevill's structuring of supernatural events, and his dedication to atmosphere, mirrors James's stylistic tricks without resorting to outright imitation. The novel is a re-imagining of James's malevolent magicians and emotionally charged entities, not a rehashing, and it is within the author's understated ability to merge settings whose very lanes and beaches are haunted—creating a sense of antiquity and isolation so prominent in James—with believably flawed characters that makes this addition to the modern gothic worthy of standing beside such supernatural novels as *The House Next Door*, *The Ceremonies*, and *Nazareth Hill*.

The beach of St. Andrews is captured in haunting, stately beauty, an uneasy sense of the modern clashing and, at times, subtly co-conspiring with the archaic and ancient natural landscapes and man-made antiquities to entice, deceive, and destroy not so much human life but humanities failed, often pathetic sense of perception. Rustic lanes, sea, and coast reflect the natural chaos of character's apprehensions and desires, with Nevill capturing that sense of place and brooding atmosphere so crucial to the suspension of disbelief in a supernatural work of novel length. In Nevill's hands, we not only believe the impossible but begin to question the very senses by which we perceive both the universe and our pitifully small roles within it, sensing from this grand necromancy a sense of awe alongside the terror, a desire to know that which we simultaneously dread. A wonderful story wonderfully told, this chilling novel reaffirms the place (and importance) of traditional supernatural fiction in the twenty-first century.

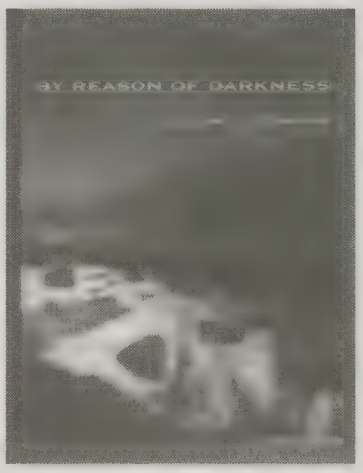
-William P. Simmons

***Black Fire*, by James Kidman; Leisure, 2004; 339 pgs.; $6.99**

Seven years ago, an act of violence was committed in the dying mining town of Black Hills by Michael Farris that was so horrendous that it changed the landscape of the town forever. Called "The Showdown" by the seemingly lone survivor of the violence, Michael's son Eddie has since become the recipient of the town's hatred and hostility.

As the story starts, things have settled into routine for the ostracized Eddie as he works for his only real friend, Mattie St. Clair, at the local bookstore in between seeing the odd movie at the local theater. The only other sympathetic figure in Eddie's life is the local sheriff, who barely survived Michael's rampage and who has his hands full trying to keep Eddie out of trouble. Then, to upset the applecart, Eddie's lost love Rachel shows up out of the blue and tells him that she is being stalked by Michael (whom Eddie knows is dead), and that she not only spent time in an institution after the melee but also has had Eddie's child.

From here on, Eddie's life starts to spiral downward. He continues to fight against the local antagonism towards him, starts to take a more active role in his own life, and tries to protect Rachel and his son, without letting anybody know that he's helping them (by Rachel's request)...or that his father is apparently back. Woven into all of this are the fragments of Eddie's past that he is starting to remember. A past that will again turn his life inside out as he slowly realizes that all of the facts that he remembers about "The Showdown" may be lies.



Told in three ways—the past, the present, and through Eddie's journal as he reconstructs what happened up to and including the incident during the times he wasn't present—*Black Fire* constantly shifts between past and present, and the real and unreal. Except for a few vague elements, like a possible specter, a family curse that just may or may not be inherited madness, and the return of his father who may or may not be dead, this is not a supernatural horror story. Instead it is a claustrophobic psychological horror/dark suspense novel along the lines of *Psycho* that slowly and gradually unfurls like a black flower that only blossoms at midnight.

Black Fire tells two stories that become one and plays with readers' conceptions about Eddie. While it takes a while to really get going, it's likely one of the best dark suspense novels of the past ten years.

-Mark Louis Baumgart

***By Reason of Darkness*, by William P. Simmons; House of Dominion, 2004; 282 pgs.; $17.95**

The 22 stories (half reprints, half originals) comprising William P. Simmons' first book-length collection are book-ended by a Gary A. Braunbeck introduction and a T. M. Wright Afterword. These were appropriate choices, as Simmons' writing has qualities reminiscent of the distinctive styles of these two luminaries.

Simmons' thematic approach to horror bears similarities to Braunbeck's. As is typical in this genre, these stories are mostly about death—but not just physical death. He is equally concerned with examining the death of youth, the death of love, the death of dreams. In Simmons' world, every man owes not just one big death, but many smaller ones along the way. As with much of Braunbeck's distinguished output, many of Simmons' tales contain no supernatural element, and when they do, they stand as a metaphor with deeper spiritual connotations beyond their immediate physical threat. Take for instance "The Field," in which an untended crop of corn creeping closer to a farmhouse stands as an allegory for responsibilities that won't be ignored. These are stories steeped in pain, but more mental anguish than physical. You might call this "the horror of ennui".

Stylistically, Simmons compares favorably with the dreamlike, poetic quality of T. M. Wright's prose. His carefully crafted descriptive phrases create a solid sense of place and atmosphere. He knows what details are important, and can develop a character or a relationship as fully in one paragraph

as lesser authors might need a chapter to accomplish. He finds gateways between the living and the dead, then opens them wide. In a word, his stories are *spooky*.

An obsession Simmons returns to time and again is the month of October, especially its capstone holiday, Halloween. Indeed, had Ray Bradbury not already used it, *The October Country* would have been a perfect title for this collection. Most of his stories take place in his fictional town of Harper's Mill in this month, which symbolizes the twilight between the brightly lit life of summer and the dreary death of winter. In "Pumpkin Light" and "The Halloween Boy," for instance, Halloween is the one time of year dead children may return to take part in the festivities of life.

For folks who love the Halloween tales of Bradbury, Al Sarrantonio and Paul Melniczek, *By Reason of Darkness* is the must-read collection of the year.

–Garrett Peck

***Coffin Blues*, by Tom Piccirilli; Leisure, 2004; 308 pgs.; $6.99**

Coffin Blues presents the further adventures of Priest McClaren and Lamarr, the two unlikely heroes introduced in Piccirilli's outstanding 2002 western, *Grave Men*. Piccirilli picks up their story almost exactly where he left it, with McClaren still trying to deal with the tragic death of his parents, his sister's past life as a bounty hunter, and his passion for his ex-lover Sarah. This time out, McClaren and the black ex-Union soldier Lamarr are asked by Sarah to travel to Mexico to rescue her new husband, Septemus Hart (Lamarr's hated daddy), who's being held hostage by Don Braulio, a local baddie who likes to dispatch his victims with custom-made knives. Doing so, they find danger and intrigue, encounter old enemies, and discover some ugly truths about themselves and those around them.

Piccirilli continues to show a real affinity for the western, producing a story with generous helpings of humor, action, and existential angst. It's obvious he knows his characters inside and out, and that he's been living with them for quite some time—the story seems to be told by someone who witnessed the events firsthand. Everything else works just splendidly—Piccirilli's dialogue shines, and the set pieces he creates are harrowing, often humorous, and very true to life. Check out Chapter Two for the best example of this—Piccirilli's writing in this scene is particularly vivid and cinematic.

A tale of tortured, complex characters trying to make sense of their twisted lives while also trying to "do the right thing," *Coffin Blues* is wildly entertaining, featuring the kind of writing that keeps you flipping pages past the point of exhaustion. A traditional western skewed by Piccirilli's offbeat sensibilities, *Coffin Blues* should appeal to horror and western fans alike.

–Hank Wagner

***The Coma*, by Alex Garland; Riverhead Press, 2003; 200 pgs.; $19.95**

In *The Coma*, Alex Garland takes on an idea that's been done a million times by many a famous writer. Is the character awake or asleep, alive or dead, seeing or dreaming? It's a dangerous business to visit ground that's as heavily trafficked as this. Garland treads lightly, and keeps the novel succinct. 40 gorgeous woodblock illustrations by his father certainly help matters along. But for all Garland's narrative skill, readers may find Garland's ability to conjure unease in *The Coma* insufficient compensation for the overly familiar premise.

The plot is nearly as thin as the novel. Carl works late at the office, and finds himself alone on the tube with a woman—until they're both joined by a group of thugs. When the hoodlums menace the woman, Carl steps in and gets stepped on. The last thing he remembers before passing out is getting pummeled. Then—the hospital bed. Or is it?

Chapters in *The Coma* are one or two pages, and each chapter is accompanied by one of Garland senior's woodcuts. The illustrations are creepy and effective, bolstering the mood of the prose. As it becomes clear that Carl has not wakened but is still in a coma, Garland has his character confront this situation head-on. There's no maybe about it, Carl knows he is in a coma and knows that he must wake up. Trapped in a world of his own creation, the fear begins to seep from the pitch-black pictures into the character—and thence into the reader.

By keeping matters simple, Garland manages to evoke a number of very effective chills. He swiftly bangs the lid shut on Carl's mental jail and the reader can hear the ringing bars. What Garland is after here—and actually manages to get—is the universal sense of mental claustrophobia. Garland's surreal juxtapositions of time and space, the lacunae that Carl experiences, serve to remind the reader of how precious and fragile our sanity is. In many ways, this book is the rather safer equivalent of experiencing a particularly bad but ultimately mundane drug-induced hallucination.

–Rick Kleffel

***Compositions For the Young and Old*, by Paul G. Tremblay; Prime Books, 2004; 215 pgs.; $15.00**

Paul Tremblay is an author of deep vision and intense literate style. With this collection, *Compositions For the Young and Old*, he has done what most authors don't even attempt; he has tied the entire work together in a cohesive tapestry of images that stand on their own, but would be lessened without the whole. Told in a sequential aging process, from the perspective of very young characters on through the haunting images of an aged colonel in a nursing home, this collection spans years of lives and many levels of pain and poignant emotion.

Some of these stories, particularly in the early pages of the book, are so painful they are difficult to read. As a young boy, convinced that the only way he can regain his mother's attention after his father's death is to hurt himself, again and again. What he does to his baby sister as well as himself when his mother starts to not pay attention is a difficult story for a parent to read, and yet, beneath it all there are messages that draw you on toward what is to come.

The variety is astonishing, not so much that one mind conceived all these words, but that despite its diversity of theme and setting, this collection fits together like a puzzle constructed of pieces and parts of many other puzzles that happen to fit in this new shape, as well as their old.

As in any collection, there are standout stories. "The Pond" is one such, how a life can be affected from an early trauma and molded all the way through death. "City Pier" and "Dole As Ribbit" are two stories that join; two parts of one longer narrative that teases the reader into believing there may be a novel buried there, just out of reach. The two take place in a city that doesn't exist, built over massive piers that overlook an ocean of a hopeless future with an entire civilization living and crawling beneath the planks of the pier. Another amazing tale, one that won the Chiaroscuro Short Story contest and will stick with you for a long time to come is "The Laughing Man Meets Little Cat." This poetic tale uses a perpetually smiling man and his "mission" to lay bare the pain of the world in a little boy's life.

Tremblay shows his diversity by bringing in the ghost of Mark Twain through the eyes of a Ouija board and conjuring Poe from the words of his classic poem "Annabel Lee." Baseball winds its way into "Hackin' at the Peach," where the great Ty Cobb becomes a character.

And the line "Can't Sleep, Clowns Will Eat Me" is reversed in "The Harlequin and the Train" in a manner that is sure to cause both deep thought and the loss of perfectly digested food.

This is a very strong collection from a talented author. Readers of *Cemetery Dance* will notice that the prose is very reminiscent of Gary Braunbeck. One of the finest collections I've read in years.

Highly recommended.

–David Niall Wilson

***CrissCross*, by F. Paul Wilson; Gauntlet Publications, 2004; 416 pgs.; $55.00**

F. Paul Wilson published his first horror novel, *The Keep* in 1981. Discussing the book in *Horror: 100 Best Books*, J. N. Williamson wrote, "It is difficult...to imagine anything essential to the genre's form which was omitted. Whatever a reader or reviewer of horror fiction thinks primary—necessary in the sense of originality of idea, basic to tight plotting and its progression, desirable in characterization and imperative in terms of suspense, surprise and the inexorable buildup of the total storyline from event to event,

chapter to chapter—seems to me present in Dr. Wilson's work."

After *The Keep*, Wilson published five more books in what he came to call the "Adversary Cycle": *The Tomb* (1984), *The Touch* (1986), *Reborn* (1990), *Reprisal* (1991), and *Nightworld* (1992). Apocalyptic fiction at its best, the Adversary Cycle introduced several concepts that came to form the core of much of Wilson's fictional universe: the ancient, evil entity called Rasalom, his eternal opponent Glaeken, the town of Monroe, Long Island (Wilson's analog of Arkham, Oxrun Station, and Castle Rock), the wandering healing spirit known as the Dat-tay-vao (first seen in *The Touch*), and the modern pulp hero known as Repairman Jack.

The secretive Jack, who conceals his existence from the world, made his first appearance in *The Tomb*. Not wanting to be locked in to writing a series character, Wilson left him near death at the end of that novel, only to have him reappear in *Nightworld*, playing a key role in frustrating Rasalom's bid to enslave humanity. Jack's fans proving persistent, Wilson responded with a new Repairman Jack novel, titled *Legacies* in 1998, following it with *Conspiracies* (1999), *All the Rage* (2000), *Hosts* (2001), *The Haunted Air* (2002), and *Gateways* (2003). Set between the events in *The Tomb* and *Nightworld*, the books chronicle Jack's growing awareness of the battle between Rasalom and the entity he refers to as "the Otherness" or "the Ally." Similar to the late Isaac Asimov, Wilson is working to link the bulk of his fictional output, subtly revising the books in the Adversary Cycle to fit the new continuity he is creating through his Repairman Jack novels.

CrissCross, the latest installment in Jack's ongoing saga, finds Dr. Wilson in excellent form. As is his custom, he gives Jack two problems which inevitably converge—as Jack was told in an earlier story, there are no more coincidences for him. This time out, the repairman attempts to rescue a convert to the up and coming religion of Dortmentalism, at the same time trying to extricate a Catholic nun from a sticky blackmail situation. Rather than reveal too much of Wilson's engaging plot, let's just say that the author seems to take great pleasure in complicating Jack's already complex existence; readers, especially fans of rugged types like Travis McGee, will delight in watching Wilson extricate his creation from the deadly situations he's concocted. Their only qualm will come from the realization that as Jack draws closer to his date with destiny, the series will inevitably draw to a close. Enjoy it while it lasts.

–Hank Wagner

***Damned: An Anthology of the Lost*, edited by David G. Barnett; Necro Publications, 2004; 449 pgs.; $50.00**

When Necro Publications calls together writers such as Ed Lee, Jack Ketchum, Brian Hodge, Tom Piccirilli, Gary Braunbeck, Gerard Houarner, John Everson, Charlee Jacob, Jeffrey Thomas, Mehitobel Wilson, Patrick Lestewka, and Doc Salammen, there's one prediction you can safely make: there will be carnage and it won't be pretty. Okay, that's two predictions. Challenged to write about hell, either classic or personal, none of these writers would ever be at a loss for words. The theme is loose enough to allow many approaches, but direct enough to herd in their grotesquely fertile imaginations. Here are fallen angels, avenging angels, horny angels, sadistic angels, a generous helping of demons and other Hadean Red Sea cruise ship personnel, plus various individuals whose motivations are surely hellish.

John Everson's "Green Green Glass" is the book's only rock-and-roll parable, and you may never drink Rolling Rock again after reading it. Jack Ketchum's "Damned If You Do" is about a choice though not a terribly hellish one for the protagonist. I have often identified the work of Gary Braunbeck and Brian Hodge as the "soul" of the anthology in question, and they do not disappoint here. In this case, add the reliable Edward Lee, who turns in the surprisingly sweet fable, "The Angel." "That, and the Rain" is vintage Braunbeck, in which an angel's cynicism about humanity's cruelty is balanced by a strange hope, and "When the Bough Doesn't Break" adds a hefty slice of Hodge's patented mythology-laden theological speculations to a tale about what may be an ancient evil in Ireland. Tom Piccirilli's "Thief of Golgotha" reaches back to the less famous crucifixion victims. Gerard Houarner's "No We Love No One" is perhaps the weirdest story in the book, depicting a strange rain of…babies. Patrick Lestewka's "The Coliseum" is an inventive blending of THUNDERDOME and NO ESCAPE plus cannibalism, taking place in a hockey arena converted into a hands-off prison for the most hardened criminals and perverts, though its long catalog of grue eventually overwhelms and deadens the senses. The same problem plagues Doc Solammen's "Nexus of Crisis," which is superbly written satire but, at 132 pages, just a bit too long and over the top.

Good work from Jeffrey Thomas, Charlee Jacob, and Mehitobel Wilson rounds out an anthology that, on the whole, succeeds more than it fails. That its failings are due to excesses is by no means insulting to Necro Publications, which has consistently championed the outrageous while pushing the proverbial envelope with admirable ease. There is something here for everyone to find, but the stories are not for everyone—and that's just how Necro and its publisher, David Barnett, like it.

–William D. Gagliani

***Dark Places*, by Jon Evans; Dark Alley/HarperCollins, 2004; 326 pgs.; $13.95**

Dark Places, the debut thriller from Jon Evans, is one of the five best books I have read this year. It is taut, surprising, and a genuine page-turner. I almost never use that worn-out "page-turner" label, but here it fits. Literally. Reading the novel, I couldn't wait to find out what would happen next.

Surprising, yes, and all the more so for a first novel. Jon Evans, according to his bio, is set apart from the rest of us by his adventurous nature. He has "backpacked through some of the most remote and exotic places on Earth." That might not sound so impressive, but Evans makes good use of his experience in the novel as it provides an unusual and rich setting for a murder mystery. The book opens with the main character, Paul Wood, hiking through the Himalayas. He comes across a dead man—not just dead, but murdered. More than that, the unfortunate fellow has a pair of knives protruding from his eye sockets. Something decidedly weird is going on.

Paul gets wrapped up in the mystery and begins investigating. He discovers the murder seems to be the work of a serial killer. More than that, there is an association of serial killers who compete with each other for body count and "style points" in the murders that occur all over the globe. Paul's investigation is eventually noticed by the killers themselves and he then becomes their target.

The tale is told in a snappy and assured narrative. Evans frequently pauses to let the reader in on technical information but he does it in an entertaining way (i.e., it's not like sitting through an economics lecture). The dialogue always rings true and draws you into the story. Evans has done a fine job with all elements of the novel.

It is great to get a pleasant surprise once in a while. *Dark Places* is an unexpected delight. Don't let it get buried in the landslide of inferior work out there. Find a copy and buy it. You will not be disappointed.

–Wayne Edwards

***Dead Lines*, by Greg Bear; Ballantine, 2004; 256 pgs.; $24.95**

No matter how much we may miss them, we're happy the dead can't give us a phone call. Some empty spaces, no matter how much they may hurt, need to stay empty. Think what might fill them if they didn't. Lovecraft and many a horror writer since have kept the shivers coming by creating the shadows, by exposing the emptiness.

Greg Bear is an old hand in the world of science fiction horror, and he's written some of the landmark titles. *Dead Lines*, his latest novel, is a very effective return to this format, reminiscent of the great novels of the 1980s, particularly the work of the great Dennis Etchison.

Peter Russell doesn't just know the emptiness, he lives it. Since the murder of Daniella, one of his twin daughters, he's been divorced and aimless. He barely gets by, running errands for Joseph Benoliel, an old Hollywood producer who lives in hiding on an authentically gothic Malibu estate with his young wife Michelle. There he meets Stanley Weinstein, the head salesman for a new type of cell phone called Trans. But Trans is much more than a cell phone, Weinstein says. He's unfortunately unaware of just how much more. Trans technology has opened up a

gateway, and what's coming through is all too clear.

Jumping on the quantum bandwidth bandwagon, Bear's Maguffin, the Trans, operates by using the 'interconnectedness' of elementary particles. For a science fiction writer, he wisely keeps the science in the background. *Dead Lines* is a mood novel of dread, despair and depression.

Dead Lines is written in plain but efficient prose and very short chapters, meant to keep the pages turning, and it works. This is the breath of the crypt, the smell of dark secrets unearthed after staying too long out of sight and out of mind. It's short, sharp and to the point.

Bear brings out the New Age healer, the buried bodies and even suggests that there's an ecology of the afterlife. We're not at the top of that food pyramid. And while Bear does show us the shadows cast by the pervasiveness of a technology that nobody really understands, he doesn't infuse the novel with needless details. He waves his hands and leaves trails of darkness.

–Rick Kleffel

***Deep Blue*, by David Niall Wilson; Five Star Books, 2004; 323 pgs.; $26.95**

As a reader who has always loved works of fiction that connect somehow to music, I was thrilled to experience *Deep Blue*. David Niall Wilson's multi-faceted novel begins with a blues and horror connection that, though it appears familiar, never fails to excite. Much to his credit, almost immediately he charts a new and untraveled course, taking his protagonists in a direction totally unexpected and yet completely engrossing. In the hands of someone less capable, writing descriptively about music can be a frustrating exercise—but Wilson's sure hand produces clear, sharp notes.

When guitarist Brandt gets too drunk once again and locked out of his house, he meets Wally, a mysterious harmonica player. Wally's haunting melody grabs Brandt and changes his outlook, and he opens himself up to channeling such pain through music. What Brandt learns is perhaps too much, for during his band's next show Brandt plays as he has never played before, literally making his band and their audience see visions of the world's pain. Then Brandt walks away, leaving his friends behind. Shortly thereafter, the band's bass player, Synthia, who has seen "angels" all her life, experiences the same phenomenon—and the crowds of ghostly people she sees seem to hear her, too, for the first time. She walks away, leaving guitarist Shaver and drummer Dexter hurting, as well as high and dry. Shaver and Dexter experience their own phenomenon, and soon confide in their friend Liz. Strangely, everyone in the group has experienced through the music something deeply connected to their past. When it's apparent that Brandt and Synthia, now together, have begun calling the others to them with a new haunting melody, the band reunites to share their weird experiences. Dexter, slave to patterns beyond even his drummer's mentality, has intuitively understood the universal calling of each person's one true song, but what can be so strong as to call the entire band?

Beginning as it does with a blues band and a mysterious harmonica player, you might be forgiven for assuming this is another blues related, "Devil's music," *Crossroads*-oriented novel. Some of those elements do poke their heads in as if to nod their approval. But, though it seems to revel in its familiar blues milieu, *Deep Blue* has other ideas. The author clearly has a differing agenda, made more certain by the "visions" the band members experience. Now united again, the band searches for their purpose, knowing that their life together—and their music—truly have a purpose, and the key to that purpose is Liz. Wilson takes a dramatic left turn here. While jarring on the one hand, Wilson pulls it off simply by allowing each band member's story to further our knowledge. By the time we hear why Liz left home years before, we want to know what happened in that isolated California mountain town emotionally and morally controlled by a flamboyantly shady minister. The whole town is in this man's thrall, and their death ritual includes a sineater—but is the tradition holy or evil? And what is the band's connection to this ancient practice? As the band's van approaches Friendly, California, their destiny comes slowly clearer—to them and to the reader.

David Niall Wilson (*This Is My Blood*) turns the music-related horror novel on its ear, writing in a simple but poetic prose that nicely underscores the novel's tendency to approach magical realism. Indeed, moments recall some of James Blaylock's California gothics such as *The Rainy Season* and *Night Relics*. It's hard to name a recent horror novel that managed so much from so little grue and so low a body count, and the fact that Wilson's narrative still causes chills is a good sign that he has tapped into the vein of "quiet," allegorical horror once valued by so many. The blend of elements recalls the work of another master, Charles de Lint, but Wilson creates his own mythology and his own potent mix of cultures with easy conviction. *Deep Blue* is a wonderful find and well worth exploring.

–William D. Gagliani

***The Double Shadow*, by Clark Ashton Smith; Wildside Press, 2004; 106 pgs.; $15.00 trade pb, $29.95 hc**

While one rarely wants to borrow text from a back cover blurb, in this case there is sufficient reason to highlight two short phrases from the back of this Wildside Fantasy Classics reprint edition of a 1933 collection. First is the identification of Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961) as "one of the 'big three' classic authors from the legendary pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (the others being H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard...)." No more succinct way exists to introduce a new generation to a writer long since gone, but—one hopes—not forgotten. Thanks to Wildside Press, at least potentially not forgotten. The second phrase worth borrowing is "Smith's decadently jeweled prose." This also is as descriptive a term as any I could forge to describe the narratives within this short but impressively weighty collection.

Indeed, Smith's vocabulary is a stark reminder of how much we have lost as our culture has sped up and networked. Imagine writers today using some of the following: fulgurations, verdurous, adumbration, and thaumaturgy. Lending the narratives weight by sheer force of syntax, Smith fashioned simple tales of cosmic terror wrought by mysterious sorcerers, monarchs, and towns. The six tales included herein: "The Voyage of King Euvoran," "The Maze of the Enchanter," "The Double Shadow," "A Night in Malneant," "The Devotee of Evil," and "The Willow Landscape," all read like parables in which someone is amply "rewarded" for either negative or positive attributes. King Euvoran, for instance, squanders his fleet in search of a supposedly rare bird, only to find himself subsisting on nothing else on an island where the bird is plentiful but nothing else is (and, during the voyage, having been imprisoned in a "human-cage" by a race of intelligent, imperious birds). A necromancer seeks to invoke an evil being, succeeds, and is plagued by a shadow which rapidly supplants his own. An eccentric collector of evil is reduced himself to the essence of his quarry. A wanderer whose indifference led to his lover's suicide stumbles into a town where her funeral is never-ending and all-consuming. A painting finally brings the peace that has eluded its owner. Simple in structure, but elegantly worded, these tales transcend their pulp origins by reminding us that gore and action, and even dialogue, cannot carry a story without a stout foundation of philosophy and language.

Readers and writers in our field should at least visit Smith's worlds (and Lovecraft's and Howard's) once. They will come away with a renewed sense of storytelling, even if Smith's style doesn't itself rub off.

–William D. Gagliani

***Duel & The Distributor*, by Richard Matheson, Gauntlet, 2004; 360 pgs.; $66.00**

A writer who brought believability and a conscience to speculative and dark fiction early in his career as a short story writer and screenwriter, Richard Matheson's forays into the darkness of human thought, reaction, and the supernatural have at their heart a scathing view of the universe, depicting internal and external worlds of blind injustice and malevolence. His greatest characters battle against hostile odds in a world where there is little comfort and less hope, depicting the struggle of the One, the outsider or cultural anti-hero, against not only a society or supernatural/psychological threat but, in addition, the very confines of the self and the perceptive facilities that result in transformation, defeat, or both. Nowhere are these themes and Matheson's once lean, foreboding powers illustrated to greater advantage than in the

two stories and scripts which make up the contents of this newest Gauntlet collection, edited by Matthew R. Bradley.

This heavily illustrated collection of narration and images is both an education and entertainment, including the stories *Duel* and *The Distributor* with their respective scripts, each of which is reproduced in its original format, including handwritten notes and revisions for historical accuracy and a sense of collective value. Matheson ushered fear from traditional Gothic settings and showed the possibilities of placing terror in the living room, right next door or in one's heart. By removing the distancing effect between the reader and characters/locations, a greater sense of intimacy was achieved. Energy, passion, and the sensation of an artist reaching the pinnacle of his craft is most evident in *Duel*, the author's last story, and one whose theme of an everyman battling the unknown force of a truck on a lonely stretch of highway was a culminating capstone of the author's fixation with paranoia. As existential philosophy and escapist entertainment, the script offers readers the opportunity to study how Matheson adapted his work into a form dependant upon images, playing with scenes and arrangement to achieve new fluidity. *The Distributor*, a classic piece of subtle terror following the efforts of an enigmatic, low-key gentleman to wreak havoc in an L.A. suburb by manipulating the desires and fears of his neighbors is even more chilling, with the very indifference of the main character and the emotional distance of the writing lending dread to both story and script, the latter of which remains un-produced and appears here in print for the first time.

While the quality of writing is the chief value of this collection, a generous amount of bonus material lends further context and perspective. Each story is introduced by reproductions of the *Playboy* covers in which each piece first appeared. *Duel*, enhanced by both a Foreword and interview with actor Dennis Weaver, and an Afterword by Matheson, also offers extensive photos and conceptual art, while *The Distributor* includes an Afterword by both author and editor. A creative assemblage of text, photos, and historical documentation, this collection is one more testament to the creativity that Matheson displayed while embracing dark fiction.

–William P. Simmons

***Dust Of Eden*, by Thomas Sullivan; Onyx, 2004; $6.99**

Dust of Eden is a novel written on a great number of levels. For your average horror fan, there is the main story, winding its way from the desert outside Baghdad to the small assisted living community of New Eden, to the garden that first bore that name, and on to the conclusion. There are no slow moments in Sullivan's prose. The plot is as winding and sinuous as the serpent that inhabits it, and the characters come to life along the way, each in his or her own time and depth, but the curves are more like whip-cracks, flicking the reader forward in roller-coaster fashion, than they are impediments.

Still, to be drawn into the quick moving plot and stop there would not do this work justice. There are deeper relationships binding certain of the characters. There are moral and philosophical questions littering the pages and demanding at least passing attention.

There is a crater full of red dust in the desert. A small, very secret circle of men guards it to the death, as it has been since time out of mind. One man discovers that red bowl of sand by accident, and acts as men throughout history have acted. First he is curious, then he covets, and at last, when he has taken the object of his desire, he contemplates it, regrets his actions, and seeks redemption.

Though on the surface this is a novel of coincidences, beneath that is the thread of destiny. Do things happen because they happen, or is there a greater intelligence behind it? Is that intelligence malevolent, or benign? Loving, or manipulating? If that intelligence is, in fact, modeled after Man, as most organized religions would portray it, will it act in accordance with that similarity, or is there something greater and meaningful behind it all?

In *Dust of Eden*, some of the sand of creation—whether it is the stuff of which Eden was made, or the dust that it became at its destruction, is not clear—is stolen. Most of what is stolen is reclaimed, presumably by the guardians from whom it was taken, but one vessel is mailed off to America disguised as the ashes of a man who died while stealing it.

The ashes end up sitting around forgotten, until the night that Ariel, an artist, remembers them on the night she has chosen to end her life. When she mixes the sand of Creation with her paints, everything changes—for her, anyway, and what follows is, I believe, a pretty accurate portrayal of Man (or Woman) as creator—how the human mind might react to ultimate power, how small the focus of their ambition could be, and how petty their handling of unthinkable control over others.

And Ariel has a daughter. Her daughter died in her forties, wheelchair bound after a rock climbing accident. Amber has returned, with the painting of her portrait, and from the daughter we get reflections of the mother, and the father, and another perspective on Creation.

Tied in with all of this, we have Martin and Denny Bryce. Martin is suffering the dementia of old age, forgetting almost daily what he has been told the day before, and the day before that. His son, Denny, loves him very much, but his own ability to provide a safe environment for his father is eroding with time, much like the older Bryce's mind. When he discovers New Eden, and bullies his father into Ariel's care, a new dynamic is introduced, and along with it a poignant portrait of the relationship between father and son, the dreams and memories that haunt the one, and the desperate efforts of the other to preserve the man who gave him life.

Dust of Eden is not an easily classifiable work. The genres are, in and of themselves, not wide or forgiving enough to pigeonhole it, but the prose is powerful enough to span the borders. Highly recommended.

–David Niall Wilson

***Eye For an Eye*, by Joel Ross; Leisure Books, 2004; 336 pgs.; $6.99**

First novelist Joel Ross hits the ground running with this tight, narrow-focus thriller in which a segment of society we rarely hear about, female prison inmates, takes center stage.

Suzanne Amerce has been in a women's criminal justice institution for eight years. Known as Scorch for the way she wiped out a girl gang after they murdered her sister, she has added a wealth of prison knowledge and experience to her own through-the-roof IQ and natural intelligence. Now in her mid-twenties, she's a bombshell with a lit fuse, and as the novel opens, she has an opportunity to escape—her mother's funeral, to which she is to be accompanied. Her guards, a lazy veteran and a newbie, are no match for her meticulous planning and intelligent improvisation, and suddenly Scorch is on the loose in the hot and sultry New York summer with a state car she can barely drive and cash and credit cards from a cop's wallet. A few judicious purchases and a dye job later, she has only one task on her mind—to finish her revenge against the Tigresses by choking the last life's breath from their leader, Marie, who ordered her sister's death. But first Scorch has to find her, and evade the police womanhunt.

Complicating her life, but beautifully balancing the taut narrative, is the fact that Suzanne's prison therapist, Dr. Eric Glass, is bound to help the police capture her, even though it could destroy his relationship with every other prisoner. Also a complication is Eric and Suzanne's shared bond that may or may not be love, which makes him reluctant to help recapture her and yet hopeful of not facilitating her being gunned down by some overeager cop. Eric's own family crisis, a comatose wife and a precocious daughter, adds to the plot's realism by adding to his many ethical and moral dilemmas.

Not quite noir, but certainly bordering that tradition, *Eye For an Eye* follows Suzanne as she learns to fend for herself in the city while hunting Marie, who now is protective of her own little girl. Suzanne's run-ins with a pimp, cops, another former Tigress, along with a strip club gig, slowly prepare her for the coming face down. She haunts the old neighborhood even as Eric Glass and Lucy Moreno, the obsessive female cop assigned to the case, try to out think her. But when Eric and Suzanne come face to face, it isn't the way one would expect. The climax doesn't play out predictably, either.

Surprisingly tender for a revenge tale, this thriller with a heart also showcases the author's first-hand knowledge of the New York state prison system and its various psychological evaluation units. Indeed, Ross's

insight into the minds of female inmates, their power hierarchies, their needs and wants, their sadness, their hates, and their vengeful tendencies, all make *Eye For an Eye* a fascinating sociological study that masquerades as superior hard-boiled entertainment.

–William D. Gagliani

***Family Inheritance*, by Deborah Leblanc; Leisure, 2004; 358 pgs.; $6.99**

On a whim, friends Sharon and Roberta visit the mysterious "gris-gris man" Samuel to ask if he can discern the sex of Roberta's unborn child. Initially seeing it as an adventure, the pair starts to have second thoughts moments after entering the mystic's residence. First, they meet a black woman and her child in what amounts to the waiting room; the four-year-old boy's fascination with Roberta's condition makes them uneasy. Then, they meet Samuel's overly defensive aide, who peppers them with annoying questions. Finally, they meet Samuel himself, a curious figure of a man protected by two vicious Dobermans.

Seeing to his customer's request, Samuel dangles a pendant over Roberta's womb. Initially, the pendant sways back and forth. Then, gathering unnatural speed, the pendant actually leaps out of Samuel's hand and starts to bore into Roberta's exposed skin before the shocked magic man can yank it away. All parties are shaken by the incident, which they quickly bury in their memories. The strange events of that day are not so easily dismissed, however; forces behind human comprehension are at work, forces which eventually come to threaten the lives of Roberta's progeny.

An absorbing first novel, *Family Inheritance* is a well-written, tightly plotted work brimming with the energy and enthusiasm only a fledgling writer can bring to bear. Happily, it exhibits few of the excesses and lapses that commonly mar such efforts. Writing with a Southerner's abiding sense of place, Leblanc lavishes copious amounts of attention on her cast, building credibility from the time she plunges readers deep into more fantastic territory—it's a tribute to her skill that we go so willingly. A richly imagined, atmospheric dark fantasy oozing with dread and menace, the novel is a memorable debut from a writer obviously devoted to her craft.

–Hank Wagner

***Father Exorcist*, by Kevin Sheehan; Publish America, 2004; 148 pgs.; $19.95**

Don't let the word "Exorcist" in the title fool you, this isn't cerebral horror in the William Peter Blatty tradition. This is rip-roaring *Grand Guignol*.

In Kevin Sheehan's debut novel, history's first murderer, Cain, is a demon of immense power. He bears no flesh of his own, but steals the bodies of his victims, insinuating himself into their hollowed-out corpses. By God's own edict, he is incapable of being killed. He exists only to breed havoc and murder. Arrayed against him is Father Michael, an immortal servant of God equally incapable of dying. The two have been locked in an eternal struggle off and on through the ages, unable to destroy each other. But now things are building up to a head and Father Michael knows the End Times are coming. The clear sign is when he discovers an Impervious, otherwise known as the New York street artist Shane. An Impervious is incapable of being harmed by an evil spirit, but can be killed. Shane's girlfriend is Aimee Carter, who works in the New York City Mayor's office. She also happens to be the reincarnation of Father Michael's wife from his mortal years in Ireland, who was brutally murdered by a necromancer. Cain appropriates the body of current Mayor Spinelli and plans an evening of carnage at a meeting of the nation's mayors so horrendous it will open up the gates of Hell itself. It's up to Father Michael and the unbeliever Shane to put a stop to Cain's plans.

Sheehan's prose is occasionally clunky, but just as frequently spot on. His dialogue varies from silly to extremely clever, Cain's lines from amusing to disturbing. He has a remarkable flair for large-scale scenes of violence and depravity, which are abundant. He imbues his sometimes-cartoonish characters with genuine humanity.

So this short novel may not be perfect, but it is enormous fun. Its minor imperfections pale before the sheer momentum of its storytelling and the author's gleeful ability to push every scene as far as it can go. It's not Pulitzer Prize material, but it's damn entertaining.

–Garrett Peck

***The First Cut*, by Peter Robinson; Dark Alley/HarperCollins, 2004; 311 pgs.; $13.95**

Peter Robinson is the author of more than a dozen novels. His latest in the U.S. is called *The First Cut*, which is a reprint of a novel called *Caedmon's Song* first published in Canada in 1990. Robinson is mainly known for his Alan Banks series, and some of his books have appeared on (extended) bestseller lists. He is a writer with a solid reputation. *The First Cut* is an opportunity for fans to get hold of an older novel of his never before available in the States. Sure it is a bit dated and not as well written as some of Robinson's others, but it is not bad over all.

The story bounces between two women, Martha and Kirsten. When the novel begins, Martha is doing research on a book, the subject of which is murky and revealed only slowly in the narrative. Martha (not her real name) has sinister motives and intentions that blossom into a rage of action as the story progresses. Separately, far away, Kirsten suffers a terrible beating and stabbing incident which, once over, she cannot remember. Kirsten has recurring dreams that seem to be related, and they inform her beyond the reported details. While the one woman seems to have nothing to do with the other, Robinson does a fine job of pulling it all together near the end.

The whole thing reads like a ghost story; it smells of a decadent gothic tale without actually being one. It is just as well to think of it that way, too, because some minor elements of the narrative have not aged well. The occasional media reference, for instance seems quite dated—when's the last time you thought about CROCODILE DUNDEE? To be more or less fair, the author does address the "period piece" nature of his novel in a note at the end, so there is no reason to be too harsh on him.

The First Cut is a decent read. It is a good novel to take on vacation as a nice distraction from the boredom of relaxing.

–Wayne Edwards

GODZILLA: 50th Anniversary Edition, music by Akira Ifukube; La-La Land Record, 2004; 26 tracks, 46:28 min

The artistry of the first GODZILLA movie in its original, Japanese edition (GOJIRA, 1954) has become forgotten lately due to the spate of really poor, juvenile Godzilla films that were spewed out in the later 1960s and 1970s and in the technological CGI heyday of the '90s and 2000's. What director Inoshiro Honda and effectsman Eiji Tsuburaya did in 1954 ceases to have the astonishing effect it should have. Seen in its original Japanese release, sans American recutting and insertion of a perfunctory Raymond Burr narrative, the film is a classic of mood, pacing and design. Even the obvious man-in-suit monster effects were impressive, especially due to the intricate miniature work.

The one component that links each of the Godzilla incarnations—atmospheric original of the '50s, juvenile boxing monster of the '70s, CGI enhanced carnivore of the '90s—is the music. Japanese composer Akira Ifukube, classically trained and highly respected both in and out of cinema in Japan, composed the iconographic Japanese monster music when he scored GOJIRA in 1954. The fistful of musical motifs he designed for the first film came back, time and time again, in film after film. Ifukube didn't score every Godzilla film (the second in the series, GODZILLA RAIDS AGAIN, aka GIGANTIS: THE FIRE MONSTER, was scored with significant Western influence by Masaru Satoh, until Ifukube returned for most of the films through the late 70s; then left them to either library tracks or new composers, returning to score several of the 1990s incarnations).

The GODZILLA score is built around a quartet of essential themes, each of which was reprised virtually intact in later Toho monster films. The first is what has become known as the Godzilla Theme (on the CD: "Godzilla Main Title," "Intercept Godzilla"); it is a March in double-time for strings and tympani; actually it seems to be more representative, musically, of the Japanese people and the urgency to combat the ferocious monster than it is associated with Godzilla himself, but has become so identified with the Godzilla incarnation that any other thematic identification becomes meaningless. The second motif is more overtly associated with the military—the Army March ("Japanese Army March") is a flourishing motif for brass

and percussion that represents the military, specifically, in its efforts to protect the people from the giant monster. The third is the Monster Theme ("Godzilla's Rampage," "Godzilla Comes Ashore"), and this one is very obviously associated with the monster and his threat—a deeply reverberating, plodding, growling motif for pounded piano beneath deep, cavernous-sounding oboes. Finally there is The Requiem ("Tragic Sight of the Imperial Capital"), one of the saddest motifs ever put to into a film, a sorrowful, descending violin melody that resonated with painful mourning for the Japanese people, conquered as they are by the towering monster. This latter theme is given a tremendous choral version in "Prayer for Peace," and then closes the score in "Godzilla Under the Sea." Beyond this primary thematic triumvirate, Ifukube has composed a variety of subordinate motifs, including ethnically Japanese music ("Ootojima Temple Festival," "Theme for Ootojima Island") and action/battle motifs that remain quite compelling in CD.

While there have been plenty of theme collections from the original Godzilla and other Toho monster films released in the USA and Japan, this is the first full-length score release from a single film released in the U.S. It is essentially a re-release of the now out-of-print GODZILLA soundtrack issued in Japan on Toshiba in 1993, but with the addition of two sound effects tracks and four cues taken from the American film version, which include some sound effects for the Monster that were created, quite musically, in fact, by Ifukube. The CD booklet describes all of this, and also includes an extensive track-by-track analysis by Toho film music expert David Hirsch, plus a couple of tributes to the music. This is a very nicely packaged and comprehensively presented release of one of the finest horror scores ever written.

–Randall D. Larson

***Green Grow the Rushes-Oh*, by Jay Lake; Fairwood Press (www.fairwoodpress.com), 2004; 60 pgs.; $6.99**

Compact and complex are not easy to achieve outside the realm of poetry. Prose pulls the writer onward, beckons to the raconteur within, sinfully suggests we need more, more, more. Like Odysseus lashed to mast, Jay Lake hears the call of prose but resists the lure of more, more, more in his elegant and inspired cycle of short-short stories, *Green Grow the Rushes-Oh*. In this rather daring experiment, a dozen beautifully sculpted pieces of prose lock together with the precision of an astrolabe or an Iron Maiden.

Lake takes his inspiration from an old English counting song, the title of the chapbook. Each short-short story references a line from the song. But there's a lot more at work here than a series of short-shorts based around the numbers one to twelve. Each of the stories grows from the legend of the Green Man in England. Lake has assiduously researched his topic and his language. Each segment is beautifully written in a style that stays on the prose side of poetry, yet flows with the ease of great poetry. Given their lengths, the stories practically cry to be read aloud to your children at night.

The problem with that scheme is that you're liable to keep them awake with the subtle nightmares that Lake describes. The stories get under your skin like wood slivers, slivers that grow roots to interconnect with one another until something rather terrible threatens to burst forth. They're horror stories in the style of fairy tales, pieces of legend that each seem whole on their own, but together add up to something even more complete, even more compelling and disturbing.

Fairwood Press does an admirable job with the production aspects of this work. The cover illustration by Keith Boulger offers the proper balance of iconic simplicity and wood-grain detail. Within the book itself, parts of the cover image are reproduced with each short-short. Lake's an incredibly talented writer who apparently decided one day to do something that nobody else had done before, and he did it with amazing skill. No matter what your literary predilections are, you're likely to find *Green Grow The Rushes-Oh* a delightful and disturbing prose creation.

–Rick Kleffel

***Havoc After Dark*, by Robert Fleming; Dafina/Kensington, 2004; 241 pgs.; $14.00**

His name sounded familiar when I read it aloud from the cover, but I could not place his work. *Havoc After Dark: Tales of Terror* is the title of a new collection of short fiction by Robert Fleming. See what I mean? That name sounds familiar. I looked for a list of acknowledgements for the sources—most collections are reprints of stories from magazines and anthologies. Nothing. Ah well, the important thing is the writing. What's the difference if I don't know anything about the guy before I read the book? No difference at all.

There are fourteen stories here, apparently all originals. There are a wide variety of themes and situations represented, and that is a very good thing for a collection of stories. If they all read the same the book gets boring. Not this one. The final story is just as surprising as the first. Fleming's style is an honest one. What I mean by that is the characters have both good and bad qualities, and the author is not ashamed to show you both. The dialogue rings true and comfortable; it lets you coast through the story and sets you up to be startled when something freaky occurs.

Havoc After Dark is a good read. It's one of the better collections I have seen this year. The writing is more literate than a lot I see, and I appreciate the fact that the author does not underestimate his audience. Fleming tends to work social issues a good deal. Not just with fiction, either. In his introduction, the author complains that it is difficult for black writers to get published. Note: "Although there have been several [horror] collections written by white writers, mainstream publishers have frowned on African-American writers taking a shot at the genre, ignoring the overwhelming success of black horror novelist Tananarive Due." A couple of sentences later he adds, "[T]he door for both the short and long forms of horror fiction remains relatively closed to black writers." I am not black so obviously I haven't experienced what Fleming is talking about from the writer's point of view. I have, however, been an editor of books and magazines for about twenty years. While it is true I have never worked for a big mainstream New York publisher, I am confident they have a similar experience to mine with respect to unsolicited submissions—it is impossible to discern the color of the writer in question. The idea that publishers systematically discriminate on the basis of an unobservable characteristic is a little far-fetched. But I digress.

Just read the book. Recommended.

–Wayne Edwards

***In This Skin*, by Simon Clark; Leisure, 2004, 372 pgs.; $6.99**

Nearly a century old, the Luxor Dance Hall, located in a suburb outside Chicago, has proven a Mecca for young people for several generations. Some visited to see the latest Vaudeville attraction, others danced to swing music played by the premier big bands, still others attended performances by the likes of the Talking Heads and the Ramones. Now dilapidated, it still holds an attraction for some. One such individual, Benedict West, returns again and again to seek clues to the mysterious disappearance of his lover, Mariah who, like many others, were last seen at the Luxor. Other characters, such as the bullied Ellery Hann and the pregnant Robyn Vincent, are instinctively drawn there. When the trio comes together to delve more deeply into the secrets of the old dance hall, they find themselves pitted against unearthly forces they can barely comprehend.

In This Skin works well enough overall, but it's not prime Clark—despite some genuinely creepy moments, it suffers in comparison to earlier efforts like *Vampyrrhic*, which is guaranteed to make the hair on the back of your neck stand up. Part of the problem is that Clark is not working in his customary milieu, having set the novel in modern day mid-west America, instead of his native England. As a result, the main characters will seem just a bit "off" to American readers. Another problem (for me, at least) is the novel's uncanny, hopefully unintentional parallels to the 1955 movie REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE, what with disaffected youth coming to form a family unit after spending time in a deserted building. Half expecting Jim Backus to emerge from the shadows, dressed in an apron, somewhat diminished the tension Clark labored so mightily to build. In the final analysis, the book will probably elicit more chills from someone unfamiliar with the classic James Dean star vehicle; as for me, I just couldn't stop thinking about Jim, Judy, and Plato.

–Hank Wagner

***Iron Council*, by China Miéville; Del Rey, 2004; 485 pgs.; $24.95**

Readers have no reason to fear. For China Miéville, it's still all about the monsters. His latest novel, *Iron Council* offers another panoramic view of his world Bas-Lag, and everywhere the eye can see, Miéville has populated this world with the grotesque, the horrific, the mis-formed and the surreal. But what makes Miéville's work so appealing is that he does not equate the weird and the monstrous with evil. In *Iron Council*, readers can have their monsters and love them too.

Iron Council runs on two tracks. One set of characters, Cutter, Elsie, Pomeroy and Drogon, have escaped from Miéville's complex metropolis of New Crobuzon in search of the fabled Iron Council. Neither they nor the reader are sure what it even is, or if it can be found. As they all strike out across the frontier wastelands that surround New Crobuzon, the readers realize that what's unfolding here is nothing less than a fabulously imagined Western, with gunslingers, handlingers (one of Miéville's monstrous creations that *is* evil), railways and trail ways. Miéville's wild west is an unreal world of monsters and boomtowns, of patchwork escapees who become fReeMade rebels.

Another track stays smack-dab in the middle of the big city, Miéville's New Crobuzon. Ori Ciuraz works his way to the heart of a rebellion against an increasingly onerous aristocracy that is slowly draining the city of resources, money and young men and women to fight a war for unclear reasons against a foe that may never be defeated. If it all sounds familiar and quite applicable to today's foes it is—and yet, as cast in the imagined world of China Miéville, it's timeless as well. Moreover, Miéville never lets his baroque imagination rest. The weaponry with which this war is fought is awe-inspiring and deeply disturbing.

Iron Council is a pleasure to read on so many levels, it's almost hard to keep track of how enjoyable it all is. As a fantasy adventure, it has no equal. Miéville's imagination runs riot but he seems truly connected to a real world out there. He imagines a magic technology, the creation of golems, and extends that technology in a visionary frenzy. It's logical and beautiful. *Iron Council* is a novel so packed with pleasures that it will appeal to readers far beyond the usual confines of genre fiction. But it manages this by offering the rewards of great horror fiction in a pure form. Here be monsters that are beyond good and evil.

–Rick Kleffel

***The Labyrinth*, by Catherynne M. Valente; Prime Books, 2004; 180 pgs.; $29.95**

In her debut novel, *The Labyrinth*, Catherynne M. Valente has set out at once to define her own work, and to redefine the form. *The Labyrinth* reads more like an epic, surrealist poem, or an obscure Eastern religious text than it does a novel. The richness of the imagery, and the depth of thought injected into these words should bear the warning label "concentrated, take only in small doses."

I believe it would be doing this work a disservice to read it in one sitting, though this might be tempting. Rather than being dragged from chapter to chapter, if chapters are what the breaks actually represent, by cliff-hanging real events, the reader is caught by the leading and trailing edges of visions. Endless spiraling roads, decision brought to form as character, aggressive doors that hunt the traveler, rather than waiting passively to be tried, or bypassed.

The protagonist morphs before the reader's eyes from goddess to slave and back again in a sometimes erotic, sometimes intensely symbolic, and always intriguing journey through a maze of poetic imagery. Sometimes in charge of her own fate, sometimes at the whimsy of greater powers that *sometimes* turn out to be herself, your guide through surreality has fed upon the Rose Cross and is all direction, contains all direction—and is lost.

While I doubt this work will appeal to a mainstream audience, it is an intensely powerful debut. The work is introspective, and yet, the lens of that introspection turns on the reader in unexpected ways, much as the doors in the Labyrinth itself turn on the protagonist. Lewis Carroll intrudes with rabbits and philosophical statements that blend and melt back into the landscape with an elegance that makes you wonder if Mr. Carroll himself—or the white rabbit of his construction, might not have indeed walked the trails of The Labyrinth, finding guidance and confusion on those dark roads before departing through their own doors, into their own insanities and inanities.

This singularly lyrical novel is highly recommended for dark evenings and reflection, and while its classification as a novel may remain in question, the impact it will have, and the memories it will cause to linger in the corners of your mind, will not. Highly recommended.

–David Niall Wilson

***The Lebo Coven*, by Stephen Mark Rainey; Gale / Five Star, 2004; $25.95**

Barry Riggs has been away from Aiken Mill Virginia for a very long time. He and his brother have never gotten along, and with the deaths of his parents, brother Matt inherited the family home, so until now there was nothing to draw Barry back.

Now Matt is missing, the home has been ransacked, and everyone from Matt's underage girlfriend to the local Sheriff would like to know just what happened in that house, and why. It is to this scene that Barry returns, having lost a high-paying commercial artist's position when his company folded. Hearing of the events in Aiken Mill, he has taken the time to come home and try to locate his brother, or at least to find out what happened.

For Barry, Aiken Mill is filled with memories, and most of the good ones have moved away. He renews his acquaintance with a girl he made fun of for a childhood disease, who has grown up to be quite attractive, and who remembers him very well, the local bully, and an old friend who has become consumed with his own demon of alcohol, and maybe something more.

In the bedroom of the family house—Matt's house—the word LEBO has been written on the wall in what turns out to be cow's blood. This is the only real clue to Barry's brother's disappearance—this and a mysterious young man named Ren, who Barry learns had been renting a room from Matthew before the disappearance, and who was rumored to have been into "Satanism."

No one in Aiken Mill is who, or what they seem. The Sheriff is not as stupid as he lets on, Barry's drunken friend has a lot more secrets than he's letting on, the mysterious Ren takes on sinister overtones, and even Jennifer, the girl he finds he is falling in love with, turns out to be into Magick and spiritualism in ways that make Barry nervous.

The home he grew up in becomes a psychic battleground, and is linked to an ancient cemetery. Things Barry never would have believed in become commonplace as people he never would have believed in, or trusted, become his greatest allies.

Something awful is about to happen in Aiken Mill, and it's up to Barry, Jennifer, and whatever allies and forces they can draw together to put a stop to it.

This is a very traditional horror novel. The writing is smooth, the characters are believable, and the action is swift and lethal. Stephen Mark Rainey takes the time to develop and explain some occult background, but this does not detract from the quick pace and straightforward style of the novel. *The Lebo Coven* is a strong, very entertaining work. Highly recommended.

–David Niall Wilson

***Liquor*, by Poppy Z. Brite; Three Rivers Press, 2004; 339 pp.; $13.95**

"A POTENT COCKTAIL OF MAYHEN AND MURDER" proclaims the back of Poppy Z. Brite's first novel from a major New York publisher since her wildly violent and controversial 1996 novel *Exquisite Corpse*. The headline is disingenuous. Readers expecting a *grand guignol* of over-the-top depravity will be disappointed. Hopefully they'll get over this false expectation and come to appreciate the remarkable wit and restraint she's developed as she continues to grow as a writer.

Liquor concerns native New Orleans line cooks John Rickey and Gary "G-man" Stubbs, heroes of her previous Subterranean Press novel *The Value of X*. Both lose their jobs at Tequilatown when, in violation of the asshole manager's policy, the chef passes out beers to the crew for an exceptionally hard night's work. Forced to take separate jobs because they can't find one together, Rickey dreams up the perfect idea for a successful New Orleans restaurant: Liquor, where every dish on the menu contains spirits. G-man gets work doing bar food at the Apostle bar, and soon

convinces the reluctant owner, Anthony B., to let Rickey join the kitchen crew and upgrade the food. Rickey spills his idea for Liquor to Anthony, who in turn spills it to famous restaurateur Lenny Duveteaux. Lenny knows this gimmick is perfect for an alcohol-loving town like the Big Easy, so he offers to finance Liquor while allowing Rickey and G-man to have 75% ownership. At first reluctant, Rickey finally agrees, provided they maintain control over the kitchen. Getting their dream restaurant open will be harder than they think. They must pacify an ornery old man who intends to fight the restaurant's opening and dodge Rickey's cocaine-deranged former boss Mike Mouton, whose uncle was the victim of a gangland slaying in their walk-in freezer years ago.

Whereas her earlier horror works were decidedly graphic and counter-culture oriented, *Liquor* is a solidly mainstream work. Though Rickey and G-man are lovers as well as friends, their sexuality takes a back seat to other passions. What sex scenes there are brief and non-explicit, concentrating on the emotional rather than the physical. Though it isn't pervasively dark—indeed, much of it is light-hearted and amusing—darkness creeps into the story and explodes in a pulse-pounding climax.

This is the work of an immensely talented author indulging her passion for her hometown, gourmet food and the people who create it. Brite serves her *Liquor* straight up with a twist, and it's sure to create a good buzz.

–Garrett Peck

***The Manor*, Scott Nicholson; Pinnacle, 2004; 320 pgs.; $5.99**

An author whose psychological insight into the hearts and mind of characters is mirrored and intensified by the descriptive empathy of his richly described, almost sentient settings—characters in their own right, possessing unique physical majesty and spiritual essence—Nicholson's bewitching, highly assessable style and southern-influenced approach to the modern gothic proves the ideal aesthetic tools with which to express the awe-inspiring terrors and moments of transformed consciousness which inform the dark territories of his fevered imagination.

Interweaving telling details of everyday people and events with believable supernatural occurrences, Nicholson's two previous novels announced the arrival of a major storyteller, a modern shaman spinning modern myths of communal modern archetypes and the private demons of Self, more concerned with *story* than with the empty stylistic excesses too often the self-satisfied focus of modern fiction. In *The Manor*, an emotional whirlwind plot of convincing, likeable people struggling against the darkest past of themselves and a chilling supernatural terror, he shows himself a poet not only of mountain lore and the natural rhythms of rural storytelling but the mysterious territories of the human soul struggling to know itself.

Nicholson draws on the regional folklore of the Appalachian mountains to lend an atmospheric background and cultural reference point to a labyrinthian-plotted modern country gothic, particularly the legend haunted Cone Manor in Blowing Rock, N.C. Combining the nuances of superstition with the realistic emotional turbulence of mortality, attraction, and fear, Nicholson melds the conventionalities of Gothic literature and the thriller, reinterpreting its symbols and themes through the unique lens of personal vision and personalities of characters that we're invited to care about from page one. Mason Jackson, a young sculptor from a poor social background with something to prove to both himself and the world meets the enigmatic yet attractive Anna Galloway at Korban Manor, a legend-haunted artist's retreat for the social elite and occasional starving artist (and the dark heart of the novel), drawing out the insecurities and nightmares of its guests. Anna, dying from cancer at age 26, is a parapsychologist who has been seeing her own ghost in dreams. These two, along with other artists, find more than they bargained for in the manor of the late Ephram Korban, a patron of the arts who jumped off the Widow's walk of his home, and whose seemingly benign patronage disguises a hunger whose source is both surreal enough to invite wonder and psychologically accurate enough to empathize with.

A stunning and emotionally intense addition to the haunted house sub-genre, Nicholson's personality driven house of horrors combines the atmospheric uneasiness of such classic fear novels as *The Haunting Of Hill House* and *The House Next Door* with thematic characteristics unique to his own bran of self-coined "Appalachian Gothic." The manor itself is more than the expanded consciousness of its malevolent owner's warped desires. A vampire of walls and ceilings, it is fed and feeds upon the humans drawn to its demented spaces. People are haunted in Nicholson's dark romance of love, identity, and sacrifice as much by themselves as by the house. Much like the manor itself, whose grandiose appearance masks repulsive secrets, the characters in Nicholson's story—flesh and blood *people*, not the caricatures too often relied on—hide from themselves the secret desires and anxieties which define them, and which make them vulnerable to the temptations and witcheries of the occult. This novel is as much about people haunting themselves as it is a much welcome revision of the "bad place" genre, which its themes of isolation and need lend new unholy life.

–Wlliam P. Simmons

***Meg: Primal Waters*, by Steve Alten; Forge, 2004; 361 pgs.; $24.95**

Author Steve Alten returns to his roots with the third book in his *Meg* series. This may be one of the only trilogies to have a different publisher for each volume. Doubleday published the first book, *Meg: A Novel of Deep Terror*, in hardcover, with Bantam doing the paperback. The second, *The Trench*, found a home with Kensington for both hardcover and paperback. He eventually found a steady publisher in Forge, which now brings us *Meg: Primal Waters*.

The new book picks up the story of adventurer Jonas Taylor eighteen years after the conclusion of *The Trench*. Now a middle-aged father of two with money and teenager problems, he is offered a lucrative position as a "color commentator" on the high-rated reality program *Daredevils*. Though his wife Terry has serious reservations, Jonas is in no position to turn down the offer. Terry agrees to let him go only if he takes their troubled teen daughter Danielle along with him as a chaperone. Soon he finds himself out at sea amongst a crowd of adrenalin junkies who only feel alive when they're close to death, having to protect his daughter's virtue and his own. This turns out to be the least of his problems, though. Not only is Angel, the 70-foot long Megalodon shark once held captive in his father-in-law's failed aquatic attraction, still on the loose, but another Megalodon male has found its way to the surface. Let the buffet begin.

Alten understands what it takes to write a successful sequel. He takes the elements that made the first two books successful and ups the stakes, providing more sharks and more victims. The attacks become perversely enjoyable because many of the victims are the self-centered daredevils who routinely put their lives at risk just for the rush. Several meaningful subplots and a nice twist increase the suspense. As always, his research is impeccable and is put to good use, making several episodes that stretch credibility believable. He also does a nice job contrasting the maternal instincts of sharks and humans.

Though the *Meg* series doesn't reach the intellectual and imaginative heights of the first two books in his *Domain* trilogy (*Domain*, *Resurrection* and the forthcoming *Phobos*), they are effective page-turners. *Primal Waters* is a terrific beach book…provided, of course, that you're not planning to go in the water.

–Garrett Peck

***Morbid Tales*, by Quentin S. Crisp; Tartarus, 2004; 226 pgs.; $50.00**

Carefully realized and charged with rigor, Crisp's debut collection of painful terrors and revelations explores shadow territories of body, mind, and soul, investing his narratives with a *complete* sense of experience sadly lacking in a majority of both so-called realism (careful to include little else but drab surface behaviors and settings) and the pulp sloppiness of modern horror fiction, a subgenre often accomplishing little more than reaffirming the very banal moral conventions and scientific principles/phenomena it usually starts off by upsetting with any number of trite renditions of vampires and assorted fellow beasties.

Crisp's strange tales question everything…and then question themselves. Nothing is certain, nothing guaranteed. Loss,

corruption, rendered veils of meaning, and thankless revelations are the only constants in these tales of ambiguous motivations and overturned realities, the latter of which are mercilessly questioned by characters and circumstances resisting definition or categorization as either real or fantastique, dream or nightmare. Perception, that faulty vehicle of senses and thought we use to define our external/internal worlds and our possible places within it, is slaughtered by Crisp with the savage, poetic dark glee that lesser authors often employ when doing nothing more spectacular than ruining flesh. These eight pieces are slivers of walking midnight, distorting mirrors of the subconscious. At times, they suggest with the dry parched whisper of the dead that they might represent truths hidden by the illusion of appearance.

While several of the pieces delve into contemporary decadence, a disturbing ambience of timelessness runs through their heart, the terrors and confusions of each character speaking to the educated Everyman in readers in a way resembling the metaphysical and absurdist visions of such prophetic, introverted artists as Kafka, Strindburg, and contemporaries Matt Cardin and Mark Samuels (who contributes an excellent if brief introduction). These later two, alongside Crisp, are pioneers in a form of weird tale that honors the roots of literary history while reinventing it, expanding in theme, approach, and construction the symbols and purposes of dark and fantastic fiction with philosophic integrity and stubborn individuality.

While this path may not lead to monetary fame in a culture weaned on crass commercialism and an idiotic "one size fits all" mentality, it should result in some fine, disturbing fiction. These tales of despair, love, and shifting realities are very disturbing indeed, not the least because they dare question matters of heart, soul, and intellect that weaker hearted "popular" writers run from in their soap opera confections.

–William P. Simmons

***Mortal Companion*, by Patrick Califia; Suspect Thoughts Press, 2004; 288 pgs.; $16.95**

Everybody knows they are taking a chance by purchasing the first novel of a new series. No matter what the blurbs read on the cover, chances are less than 50-50 that the book will be enjoyable. You have to worry about all the tedious set-up that often goes on in series firsts, and you are concerned about cliff-hanger endings, which nobody really likes. After you get burned a couple of times you learn to stay away. It is a good rule of thumb. But rules of thumb do not always survive scrutiny. We find an example in Patrick Califia's new book.

Califia has an outrageous bio. It is one that appears to be designed to shock, listing such hobbies as "Japanese bondage" and "cosseting his cat." Beyond his flashy self-description, Califia has done a good deal of writing, most of it fringe. He has begun a new series of novels called *Mortal Companion*, which is also the title of the first book. It is a vampire sex fantasy kind of thing, so if you do not like the genre you can skip it from the get-go. The main character is Ulric, a pagan warrior converted to vampire in the 14th century. Conflict comes from the sister who hates him and the "mortal companion" who loves him. The latter refuses to become immortal because she would have to leave Ulric's side and establish her own hunting grounds. You can see the problem. For his sister's part, she just wants revenge for the wrongs she has suffered at Ulric's hands. This is a rich enough setting. You can imagine episodes going on for a good long while with this triangle. But would you want to?

I am not sure whether the series will pan out to be worthwhile in the long run, but the first book is definitely worth your time, as long as you can stand the adult nature of the material. More than that—you need to *enjoy* the adult nature of the writing, because it is central to the story. I have often commented that fringe and sub-genre writing is typically weak because it does not have to be good. That is, the target audience is interested in the rarified subject, not the quality of the writing, as such. *Mortal Companion* could be tighter, it is true, but it is not badly written. As a vampire novel series that is primarily about sex of all kinds, it is better than most.

–Wayne Edwards

***Necropolis*, by Tim Waggoner; Gale/Five-Star, 2004; $26.95**

Necropolis is not your average city, and Matthew Adrion, once Earth Police officer, now zombie private investigator, is not your average protagonist. Tim Waggoner has created a city of night, populated it with werewolves, vampires, witches, and every other imaginable denizen of the night. He has also populated it with character.

Centuries ago, when Earth became too difficult a place to inhabit, the denizens of the night found the encroachment of humankind too much of a threat, the journey was made through dimensional portals to a land of perpetual shadows and night, and there the city of Necropolis was founded. Since that time, a thriving civilization has sprung up with culture and problems all its own. Solving those problems is Matt Adrion's job, and it isn't an easy one.

What begins as a pretty wild premise develops into a page-turning adventure with ease and grace. The world of Necropolis is filled with intrigue, scheming villains, and heroes. Every city needs a hero, even if he *is* paid for his services.

Someone has stolen the Dawn Stone, and intends to put an end to the eternal night that is key to the very world that makes Necropolis possible. With this stone, sunlight can be unleashed, and it's up to Adrion, along with the attractive half vampire, half human woman, Devon, who has hired him, to fight their way through the murky underworld and save the city.

This is a very entertaining romp of a novel with slight leanings toward cyberpunk, and a nod to the universes of role playing games, while maintaining an integrity and mystery all it's own. The humor is spot-on, and the antics and banter of the characters draw the reader from adventure to adventure at breakneck speed. Waggoner's prose is smooth and infallibly entertaining.

–David Niall Wilson

***Nightingale's Lament*, by Simon R. Green; Ace Fantasy, 2004; 217 pgs.; $6.50**

In the dark heart of London, where it's always 3AM and gods and monsters stroll alongside the humans, John Taylor is once again up to good that at first bears a singular appearance to no good. As *Nightingale's Lament*, the latest in Green's "Novels of the NightSide" begins, he's trying to find out how Prometheus Power has come to grab a big chunk of the NightSide's power market. His search ends lamentably, but it's not the only lament he's going to hear. Hiding out from The Authorities afterwards, he's contacted by Charles Charbron, "large as life and twice as French." Charbon hires Taylor to find his daughter, Rossingnol, who is under the sway of the Cavendishes, a sinister pair of promoters who have her billed as the latest singing sensation. The trouble is, she only sings sad songs, and those who hear them are prone to end their lives.

Nightingale's Lament offers all the pleasures of the previous novels while still seeming fresh. Green's prose is consistently funny, and John Taylor, his protagonist, tries to be bad enough to keep him from seeming too good. He pops off a number of memorable one-liners, and his patter is consistently entertaining. The NightSide is entertainingly explored, and Green creates several scenes of horrifically imaginative awe. Green is a remarkably effective writer, and his work here is exemplary. He describes vistas that are astonishing, inspiring and darker than the reader might expect.

Green's characterization deserves praise as well as his prose. Rather than relying on the sidekicks from his previous novels, he creates a couple of entertaining new characters, Julien the Newspaper editor and Dead Boy. Between the two of them, readers get a few laughs, some memorable grue, some entertaining one-offs and buckets of blood. Green is ruthlessly economical. He makes every word count. The plotting for this novel is admirably tight. Green even manages to end things with an almost poetic, wistful note.

At a mere 217 pages, the novel barely gets past novella length, but that's all for the best. Neither Simon R. Green nor John Taylor is in any danger of wearing out their welcome. Simon R. Green is a man who knows what works and delivers that, only that and not a single word more. Like his protagonist John Taylor, Green is a finder, and what manages to home in on is no less than a perfectly satisfying reading experience.

–Rick Kleffel

***The Quick*, by Dan Vining; Jove, 2004; 320 pgs.; $7.99**

What happens when a poet tries to write a novel? The choices seem to be either you get a long boring prosy poem or an overcooked poetic work of fiction. Neither of these do we want to read. According to his bio, Dan Vining was a Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford. And now he has written a novel. This is the kind of information best left off the book cover, because it is a bad sign. Usually, poets cannot write fiction well and novelists are not good poets. Oh sure, there is the rare exception, but you can safely rely on the rule as a matter of course. Exceptions are few and far between.

Why am I bringing this up? You guessed it: Vining is an exception. His debut novel, *The Quick*, is surprisingly good. It is difficult to pigeonhole, which perhaps explains why Jove labels it in the most general category of "fiction". While the lack of well-defined category presents a challenge to publicity folks, it offers readers the increasingly rare opportunity of reading something off the beaten path.

The main character is Jimmy Miles, a private detective working in Hollywood. Jimmy is solicited by a woman to solve a cold murder case. Specifically, the client's father was convicted of the killing and put to death for it years ago. Despite the fact that everybody is already dead, Jimmy takes the case and gets wrapped up in the seedy underworld of Los Angeles. Maybe it is better to say the seedy *sideworld* of L.A., because Vining has created a sort of supernatural embolism for the city where entities called "Sailors" (and others) roam. Jimmy, as a matter of fact, is one of these "Sailors" but, at the beginning of the novel, he does not understand his true nature. The book turns out to be as much about Jimmy's path of self-discovery as it is a murder mystery. You get a real *Angel Heart* kind of feeling reading it, but that is all right because the author handles his work well. It is true that the story gets a little murky toward the end. Still, Vining walks you through places unique to his imagining, and it is a worthwhile trip.

As a debut novel, *The Quick* is better than expected. As a novel written by a Poetry Fellow, it is a stellar achievement. As a novel regular people (like me) might want to read, it ranks right up there near the top of the midlist. Recommended.

–Wayne Edwards

SIREN, directed by Keiichiro Toyama; Sony Playstation 2, 2004; Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. (www.us.playstation.com)

The sales clerk looks at my copy of SIREN with diffidence.

"What the hell is this?"

I just shrug my shoulders and dummy up. No sense in getting an outsider involved. Back at home I open the package and leaf through the instruction booklet. "The man on the roof is watching you," it says. And indeed, he is looking for me and if he sees me, I'm dead. I run across a bridge and shots ring out in the dark. Crouched next to a decrepit woodshed, I hear the bullets ricochet off to the right. I think I gave him the slip. I call out to Yoriko and more shots crack the night air as she follows my path across the bridge. Did she make it? After an interminable wait I hear footsteps behind me and her face emerges from the darkness. We've got to make it to the hospital. Ahead I can see a flashlight beam weaving drunkenly in the trees. We stumble through the forest, running toward the light. Getting closer we see a man hunched over, mumbling to himself. He hears us and whips around, shining the bright light into our eyes. It's hard to see clearly but there is something very wrong with him. His hands are black and gnarled, like a burned corpse. Blood runs from his eye sockets. Then we see the scythe in his other hand but it's too late. Game over.

"First use the light. Then the machine for the peeping person." What the hell is this? I meet a strange woman. She dresses like a nun but her god lives in the dark spaces between stars. She says to me, try to ignore the air raid sirens, remain very still and concentrate. The barriers between our minds become more permeable as the town of Hanuda slides deeper into the realm of the dead. Be patient. It's like tuning in a far away station on the radio. Can you see what the shibito sees as he crawls through the wreckage of the town? Can you see through the dead man's eyes? If you want, indulge in a little scopophilia. He doesn't know you're there yet. But don't ever let him see you. If you see yourself in his eyes the only thing you can do is run.

I think I am beginning to understand. SIREN is not a game that you play. It is a problem that you work on. An alchemical text to decipher or an alien artifact whose function is not clear. It may be a toy or it may be a weapon. The fact is, most people are not going to like SIREN. It's too hard. It's too opaque. It asks too much. And what does it give in return? Nightmares, and possibly a heart condition. Those things and the glimmerings of a real experience, something that is all too rare in the world of video games. "Go to the bloody crossroad" but step quietly. Watch out for broken glass. No good. He sees you. Run.

–J.B. Fleming

***Species*, by Michael McBride; Black Death Books, 2004; 305 pgs.; $22.00**

In *Species*, Michael McBride brings us the end-of-the-world encounter with aliens readers may find familiar from blockbuster movies like INDEPENDENCE DAY and novels like Stephen King's *Dreamcatcher*, but with some original twists that make this work unique.

There is an obvious affinity for medicine and science in McBride's prose. There are details—sometimes more than the reader might want—backing up the premise behind the "invasion" and its release on the earth. There is at least an attempt, which most works such as this avoid, to explain *why* the invasion is taking place, how it is taking place, what is actually happening to the humans infested with this alien plague, and why others are *not* infested. While these questions are never fully answered, there is enough factual data inserted that the reader comes to believe that they have been answered, and in building fiction, that is all that matters.

This is fast-paced, page-turning action. While the plot itself takes some tire spinning to get started, each vignette that leads toward that inevitable "beginning" is action-packed and lined with memorable characters. McBride takes his time in gathering his motley assortment of knights and sending them tilting at alien windmills, at times led, and at other times goaded, screamed at, and bewildered by their leader, William, who is no more than a young boy—a boy who until the beginning of the invasion had been thought to be autistic, or slow.

William was not slow—it's just hard to respond to a single human voice when a billion bugs are babbling in your head. It's harder still when you know you have to listen closely—because they are planning to destroy your world.

McBride's prose flows smoothly and paints vivid images. His characters are a strength that carries the reader forward, despite some amazing coincidental plot twists and stretching of the threads of credulity. There are times when it seems that in a world populated by millions, only a couple who were already tangentially associated with the main characters resurface, but in the end this is only a minor annoyance. The plot is threadbare at times, but in an action adventure such as this one, plot blurs into the panoramic blur of events. You are not given a chance to stop and contemplate what is happening, because by the time the thought occurs, you are on to the next mishap or adventure, the next wild hope or squashed dream.

The ending is ambiguous, and while many see this as a flaw, it is a very common enough treatment of horror, particularly the sub-genre of sci-fi horror. This is a fast, entertaining book and speaks well of McBride's future as an author. As a first novel, it is a standout, and hopefully the harbinger of things to come.

One drawback of this book is the stiff cover price for a trade paperback format. This is no fault of the authors, but may, in the end, limit the circulation of what could become a very popular title. It certainly has movie potential, and almost seems to have been written with cinematic scenes in mind.

–David Niall Wilson

***Spiral*, by Koji Suzuki; Vertical-Inc (www.vertical-inc.com), 2004; 281 pgs.; $24.95**

Having read *Ring*, the first novel in a series from Japanese writer Koji Suzuki, readers may think themselves prepared for the sequel. *Spiral* takes up shortly after the end of *Ring*. Suzuki isn't just selling scares in *Spiral*. He's swinging a baseball bat to your genre fiction sensibilities on multiple levels. When you expect horror, you get mystery. When you expect mystery, you get science

fiction. As a horror novel, *Spiral* offers shock and awe instead of shocking violence.

Ando, the protagonist of *Spiral*, starts the novel as a man in mourning, a coroner who tries to lose himself in his work so that he does not have to think about the accidental drowning death of his son, and his subsequent divorce. He's even thankful when presented with the body of a colleague, Ryuchi, whom readers will recall as the grating scholar who missed the seven-day deadline in *Ring*. He finds himself attracted to Ryuchi's lover, Mai, who found the body. But even on the slab, Ryuchi apparently has something to say. As Ando sews up the man, having stuffed him with newspaper, a small square of newsprint slides out as the final seam is stitched. On it are six numbers in two rows; 178 and 136.

From that instant, Suzuki begins an upward climb that takes Ando and the novel from ciphers and word puzzles into one unexpected consequence after another. While *Ring* merely suggested the viral nature of the video taped curse, *Spiral* takes mind-bogglingly confident strides from a puzzle-oriented mystery to a medical thriller and then sprints easily into the realm of science fiction. Make no mistake, Suzuki delivers one shock after another, and many of them will leave the reader ringing with horror. Even though the main character is a coroner, the shocks are not corporeal but conceptual. *Spiral* will make you think thoughts you would not ever have considered could enter your brain.

In order to manage this, Suzuki keeps his prose bone-dry. His presentation is at times too straightforward. He brings the narrative to a dead halt with explaining how DNA works, and recaps most of the plot of *Ring*. But Suzuki's crystal-clear concision is without peer when it comes to maintaining credibility in the face of plot escalations that hit precisely the right note of awe-inspiring intellectual astonishment. Like a cattle executioner in a slaughterhouse, Suzuki knows just where and how to apply his stun-gun revelations.

Spiral is the vector for a series of nasty concepts that wheedle their way into the reader's mindset with the help of his antiseptic prose and razor-blade reasoning. Suzuki cuts to the quick. His devil's-advocate logic is as contagious as his fictional virus.

–Rick Kleffel

TERROR TRACT, music by Brian Tyler; La-La Land Records, 2004; 25 tracks, 47:19 mins.

Newly released from the vaults by La-La Land Records, Brian Tyler's film score for TERROR TRACT score embodies and exudes musical haunts and horrific mayhem. The film, released in 2000, is a horror-comedy-anthology film directed by Lance W. Dressen and Clint Hutchison. Composed between THE 4TH FLOOR, PANIC, and PLAN B, this is early Brian Tyler, before he really came into his own with splendid scores for BUBBA HO-TEP, DARKNESS FALLS, CHILDREN OF DUNE, and TIMELINE.

But it's a fabulous score in its own right. Based on traditional horror movie music stylisms, Tyler has adopted and refined them into a competent and highly effective horror score. The music is fully orchestral, bleeding every drop of blood out of the Utah Symphony, which performs the music with an effervescent vigor.

The anthology format of the film gave Tyler the opportunity to score what are essentially three different stories, linked by a surrounding narrative that opens and closes the film. Tyler has adopted a fairly straightforward approach. While the musical mood is different for each of the three stories, they are not so different as to contrast severely from each other; the score is very much of a whole and musical moods and motifs are carried between the tales.

Tyler crafts an eloquent atmosphere of spookiness, lending the film a competent air of suspense that is often punctuated by orchestral onslaughts of aggressive dissonance. As noted, and admitted by Tyler, the score intentionally makes abundant use of horror film music traditions—shivering violin glissandi, pounding percussion, rapid piano riffs over apprehensive strings and pounding percussion; these form the canvas texture of the score. Tyler has described the score as homage, and it is partly that, very much in the style of the potently bloodthirsty horror scores of the past, yet with Tyler's own signature overlying much of it. On top of this canvas, in gentler strokes, Tyler has painted an exhilarating primary theme that develops a tremendous mood of adventure and excitement, offering an effective contrast to the doom-and-gloom monster music. This main melody will recur frequently throughout the score, stepping in as a subtle violin hook that meanders, up and down, to and fro, amid the spookmusic and the assertive orchestral violence; a tendril of melody that reorients the listener and keeps us focused. The score is deliberate and focused; it's much more than simple scare music. Tyler has a plan and a purpose as his music unfolds.

Taken by cues, the craftsmanship of this score becomes quite evident. "Vision" proffers up slowly oscillating strings intonations, spooky and atmospheric. In "Searching," the orchestra is embellished by a flurry of sinewy violin effects that whoosh and echo and reflect, MATRIX-like, upon themselves; the cue contains some absolutely furious trumpet performances as they blare in abbreviated staccato bursts, maintaining a frenzied cadence until the cue tapers out into a quiet atmosphere of gentle violin and harp. "Tragedy" exudes a fast-paced urgency for violins, tympani and trumpets. "Wrong Guy" is sheer ominousness, with interminably long string chords that erupt percussively, way later than you'd expect, with sudden revelation. And "Revenge" lets it all loose with a furious parade of dissonance, every wind and wood and bowed and pounded instrument clamoring with onrushing hostility.

The CD package includes notes about the film and its music from directors Hutchison and Dreesen, and producer Gregg Daniel, notes about Tyler from his webmaster, Ryan Keaveney, and notes from Tyler about the score. A completely satisfying, darkly shadowed but richly compelling outré film score. The CD may be had from www.lalalandrecords.com

–Randall D. Larson

***Vampire Dawn*, by Philip Henry; Black Death Books (www.khpindustries.com), 2004; 230 pgs.; $20.00**

Black Death Books (BDB) is an independent publisher I had not heard about before I received a review copy of Philip Henry's *Vampire Dawn*. The publisher appears to be legitimate—not a vanity racket or anything like that. BDB is part of the on-going digital Print-On-Demand (POD) evolution of the industry. While I have complained about POD operations a lot in the past, BDB appears to represent the good side of the technology. That is, they have the ability and desire to get books out that might otherwise not be available to the public, and they do it without taking advantage of hopeful but untalented would-be authors. Of course not every book BDB publishes will fit every taste. Even so, it is worth considering their products in your book buying budget.

What about *Vampire Dawn*? Well, it is obviously a vampire novel, and that makes it suspect before the cover is turned. It is just that there are *so many* similar titles out there and a goodly chunk of them are of dubious quality. This one, though, is not so bad. Philip Henry is not a name I recognize, so I had only the vampire angle to color my preconceptions. From that vantage, I was expecting a disappointment. The story is fairly ordinary: human seeks revenge on the vampire who killed his loved one. The human (name of Christian—strike two) is an interesting character, reasonably well drawn in the narrative. The vampires are a little different from others you might have read about, and their situation is a bit variant. That is all I will say about it. The allure of new vampire tales is sweetened by the mystery of the softly shifting lore. I won't spoil it for you.

I have certainly read worse novels than this one. I would have to place this one below average on a quality scale but above poor. If you are a vampire fanatic, you will probably like *Vampire Dawn*. Anybody else should approach with caution.

–Wayne Edwards

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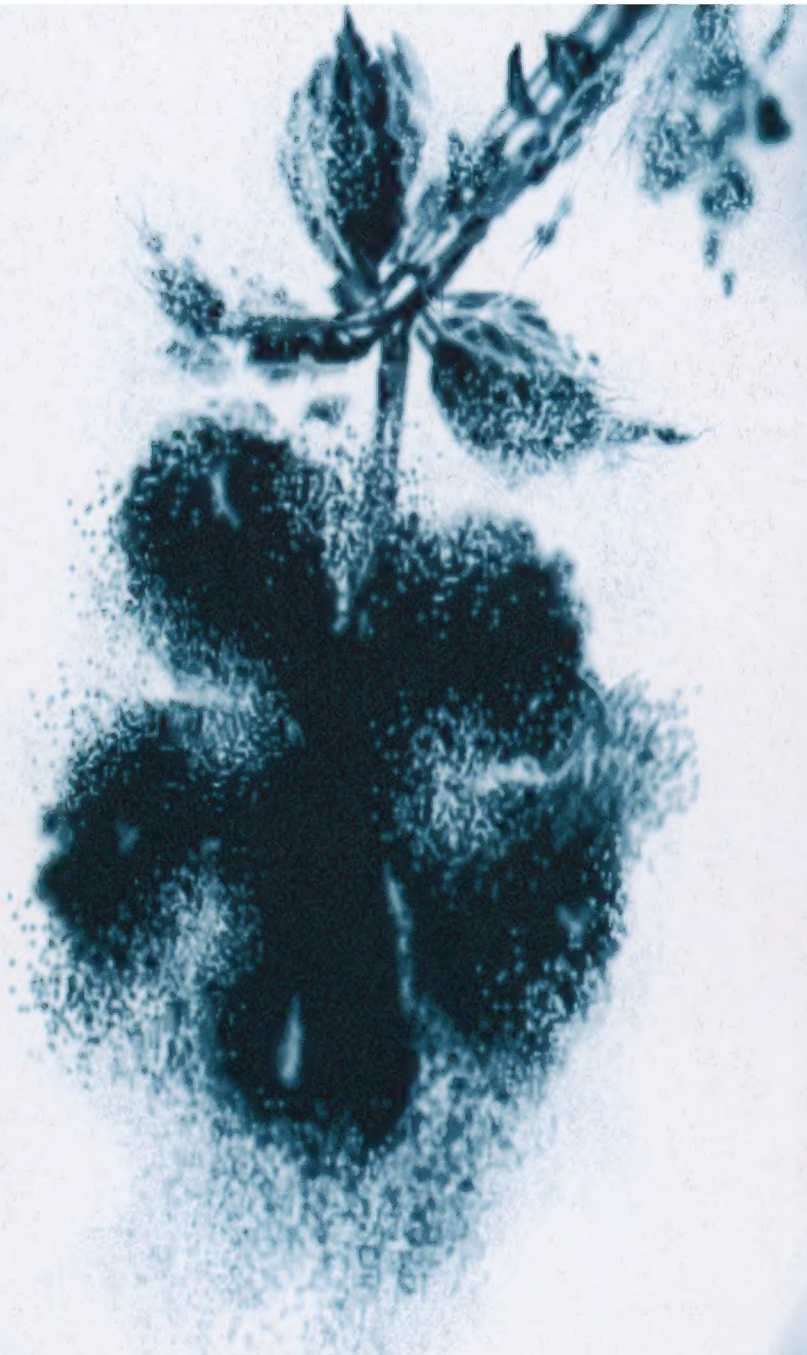

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